

THE OLDEST GOD

COMPUTRIZED
Ah. No. 1
A NOVEL

BY

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TO C. G. P.

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THE OLDEST GOD

CHAPTER ONE

NATEBY CASTLE AND THE DENNISONS

I

THE "Nateby Castle Case" must be still so fresh in the public memory that some hardihood is required of any one who recalls a scandal whereof Mr. Justice Warburton could only say: "*If I believed a word of the evidence on either side, I should feel that I must be either mad or drunk. The jury has intimated that it wishes to hear no more. I may add that I have already heard too much. The case should never have been brought, the allegations should never have been made. The sooner we can all forget what we have heard during the last four days, the sooner we shall get rid of an uncomfortable suspicion that we, too, like the witnesses who have testified in this court, have taken temporary leave of our senses.*"

For me to criticize the learned judge would be presumptuous, but the effect of his stricture—and no doubt the effect which he aimed at producing—has been that, whereas one lady sought to protect her reputation by bringing an action for slander, every one associated with the events that threatened her has now been left with no

reputation to lose. The jury discontinued the case before my wife or I could present our side of it. For the enlightenment of our own friends I feel obliged to redress the balance which Sir Lawrence Warburton tipped against all of us with wholly judicial impartiality.

Professor Shapland, who was placed with his wife in the common pillory, is laying the evidence before an informal committee of investigation selected from his colleagues at Cambridge. I, who saw and heard most, am presenting my testimony on oath; but, inasmuch as a record of disconnected facts will mislead more people than it can enlighten, I have in the present narrative selected and linked my facts with an explanation which my friends may accept or not, as they please. I am willing to be examined on the truth of my statements not only by the professor's committee but by any responsible student or learned body that cares to make an independent investigation. The statements I am about to make are remarkable enough in themselves; but every hypothesis that attempts to explain them must be more remarkable than the facts to be explained. I wish to understand, as I have tried to reveal, the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

After that, I should be thankful to know that the case had been buried beyond exhumation in the appropriate text-books. Like the learned judge, I should prefer to forget that I was ever a member of the notorious party at Nateby Castle. When we separated in the early hours of last Christmas morning, it was solemnly agreed that no one should ever refer in speech or writing to the events of the previous week. It is only because one member saw fit to besmirch the others that I feel the rest of us are freed from our pledge.

OF Nateby Castle and the Dennisons I shall say little, believing as I do that no one in the Border counties and few from places farther south can be without some knowledge of a fortress that has stood from the days of the Normans and a family that lived there from the time the fortress was built until the time, within very recent memory, when the last of the line was brought down and killed over the German trenches.

When I read the account of Harry Dennison's death, I felt that no more fitting end could have been contrived. His had ever been a fighting family; and each member in his generation had taken up the arms of his generation for the war of his generation. In the armoury at Nateby the science and art of destruction are illustrated in an unbroken series of weapons from a Norman battle-axe carried by the first de Nysson to the trench-helmet worn by the last in the early months of the late war, before he decided that tanks were rendering infantry obsolete and that aeroplanes would carry the day against tanks. He died in the van of his army and of his time.

He died in Belgium, fighting against Germany; and, so far as I could discover, this was the first time that a Dennison had played a part in that international combination. In one generation or another the family had fought against Saxon, Pict, Irish and Welsh, against brother Norman and alien French, against Saracen and Spaniard, against brother English and half-brother Jacobite. The crypt of the abbey at Birby-on-the-Wall contains a stone sarcophagus dating from the reign of William Rufus. On two coffins of the next generation

the mailed effigies lie with the crossed feet of crusaders. The heart of one Dennison is preserved in a gruesome casket of roughly polished stone. The ashes of another were sent home in some way from the Crimea.

Henry Dennison, father of my friend Harry and last but one of the line, displayed a weakness for carving his favourite quotations over the doors and mantels of the castle; and any one who raises a torch to the architrave surmounting the entrance to the hall will find cut in the stone:

I AM A PART OF ALL THAT I HAVE SEEN
YET ALL EXPERIENCE IS AN ARCH WHERE-
THROUGH
GLEAMS THAT UNTRAVELL'D WORLD WHOSE
MARGIN FADES
FOR EVER AND FOR EVER WHEN I MOVE.

The lines might have been chosen to indicate the part which the Dennisons have played in the history of England or the part which Nateby has played in the history of the Dennisons. Each contributed something to the turmoil of his day; each contrived to adapt Nateby to the changing needs of his time. One part of the house or another has been continuously inhabited since eleven-hundred; and the era when no fortification stood on the present site is an era before the beginning of history.

"We have no pre-Roman remains," Harry Dennison used to say, "but I think we have a little of everything else."

His grandfather, returning from India with revolutionary views on sanitation, had installed a single small bathroom. Sir Henry fitted the chandeliers of one century and the iron sconces of another with electric light.

Harry supplemented the vast open fires with central heating. So in every generation: a Dennison of the eighteenth century, fresh from the grand tour and fired with enthusiasm for the art of the far east, had decorated a room in Chinese style. The saloon was designed by the Adam brothers and furnished by Chippendale.

In *The History of the Wall* you may read that the three cubes in the north-west corner of the park, looking like grass-grown, flat-topped hay-stacks, are in truth three blocks of solid Roman masonry; if you rule a line from Carlisle to Newcastle, you will find that it passes through the home-farm of Nateby; and, if you climb to the top of these squat, green blocks, you may look through the rain to mist-drenched infinity north, east, south and west.

Nateby has been so much a part of my life that I cannot remember when I first went there. My father's most active period in the diplomatic service coincided with my childhood and adolescence. While he was abroad, our house in Shropshire was shut; and I spent so many of my holidays in Northumberland that I accounted myself almost a native. From Newcastle to Berwick and from the North Sea to the Cumberland border I know the country and the people as I shall never know the people and the country of my own Welsh border. It was with the Gayton that I first rode to hounds; and my first fly was thrown over the storied waters of the Coquet. In common with every man of my age, I fell in love with Adela Glynde when she returned from school to become the reigning beauty of Northumberland; in common with Harry Dennison and Keith Helmsley, Punch Escott and Peter Colyton, I fancied that my heart was broken when she promised herself to Jack Sebright.

That was in the first weeks of the war; and by 1914 I had myself been in the diplomatic service for more than ten years, with little leisure to revisit the scenes and replay the games of my childhood, though twice that time would not weaken the spell which the Wall casts over me. As a boy, armed with shield and javelin, I used to mount an eminence and keep watch for imperial Rome. Sometimes, with the wavering loyalty of youth, I led creeping and always successful parties of attack, storming the Wall single-handed, the clinging mist my one ally. Sometimes, again single-handed, I cut wide swathes in the howling ranks of the advancing barbarians. And, when my first martial ardour abated, I stretched myself in the sun or paced up and down in the rain, recreating the life on the Wall during the four centuries of the Roman occupation. At such seasons I pictured myself as a centurion, detailed for service with the legions in Britain, drilling an awkward squad of recruits on the sheltered parade-ground below me, while sentinels on either side kept watch for a raid of border tribesmen. I conjured up despatch-riders from the south, breaking in on my isolation for a moment at long intervals and authenticating the news of Rome with presents of olives which I repaid in British oysters. After these visits I galloped to the next outposts and spread my news. With increasing historical knowledge I passed from the empire militant to the empire in decline, reconstructing the days of unsettling rumours, when we men on the Wall came to suspect that all was not well at home. The great drama of my youth centred round the fatal day on which the dwindling legions in the mists of the Border received the command that Britain was to be evacuated.

Later, as an interest in sociology ousted my first crude passion for the picturesque, I exercised my ingenuity on thinking what came over Nateby and the Wall, over the network of roads and towns, over the houses and shops, the reservoirs and aqueducts, the baths and theatres, the shrines and circuses in the seven hundred years between the day when the legions withdrew and the day when a follower of the Conqueror completed the castle of Nateby. The interval—as long as that between the first Edward and the fifth George—is shrouded in darkness, which I believe can best be penetrated by any who will try to imagine what the history of India would be for the next seven hundred years if the British administration were ordered to evacuate. In the company of a natural soldier, I tramped the Wall with Harry Dennison from end to end, picturing the fortresses being dismantled, the surplus stores burning, army headquarters packing up and the troopships from Italy anchoring off the coast. With encouragement from Sir Henry, who had served on the North-West Frontier, we imagined the time-expired men hesitating to leave their farms and their British wives, the sutlers of the army of occupation deciding to “risk it”. In melancholy pageant we traced, over seven hundred years, the relentless change wherein the Roman settler forgot his language and his religion, his customs and his pride of race, ultimately even the tales of marvel which his father’s father had told him of imperial Rome.

Inheriting the passion from his father or catching it from me, Harry became a student of Roman remains. From Oxford and Sandhurst we exchanged theories that were probably more ingenious than plausible. Believing that in the government of man by man there is no new

thing under the sun, we essayed to eke out an exiguous knowledge of the Roman empire with a hardly more ample knowledge of the British. After a luncheon at some service club and fresh from conversation about the British *Raj*, we decided that, in those six and sixty years between the recall of the legions and the fall of Rome, certain half-pay Brito-Romans, meeting under an Italian sun, must have gossiped about the years of their foreign service, as our half-pay Anglo-Indian host had gossiped about old days at Sialkot; they had speculated on the fate of those who had been left behind in the mist of the north, as our friend was speculating on the fate of those who had succeeded him. In irreverent parody of a splenetic general who had discovered that India was already lost, Harry uttered the disparaging prophecy: "*They've all taken native wives. And not the private soldier alone. There's a touch of the whitening-brush about a good many women one sees in Rome nowadays. Well, every one knows how that sort of thing ends. Your half-caste inherits the vices of both races. Take my word for it, every man Jack of the people who've stayed behind will go British in a generation. I don't know what Rome's coming to.*"

3

THERE was little enough trace of Roman occupation when Sir Henry de Nysson trod the road that had been laid more than a thousand years before by a contemporary of Agricola, to take up the strategic position and to continue the frontier-patrol entrusted to Agricola's men.

Those three grass-grown, flat-topped blocks of masonry, a broken arch across a miniature valley, a scrap of tesse-

lated pavement (now fenced and roofed by the Office of Works): that is all the faint mark which Imperial Rome left on this section of the Border counties during seven hundred years. And of the seven hundred or seven thousand years before the coming of the Romans there is no trace of any kind. The men of that era, if they tilled the land or tended flocks, built nothing of temple, house or road that has survived. We may guess a little at their customs and speech; but at best it is guesswork. As Harry Dennison used to say: "no pre-Roman remains, little enough of the Roman period, hardly anything from the fifth century to the twelfth except an occasional place-name, but, after that, tolerably plain sailing."

It was while I was working for the Foreign Office examination that I became interested in the missing Anglo-Saxon chapter of Nateby; and I wrote to ask Harry, who had succeeded while I was still at Oxford, whether he had any books on the subject. He replied by placing his library at my disposal and encouraging me to browse at random, though the ground had already, he warned me, been worked to exhaustion. For ten years before the war I planned visits to Northumberland, but the Foreign Office moved me from Washington to Teheran and from St. Petersburg to Paris. The first time I returned on leave, Harry was soldiering in Egypt; the second, my attention was demanded by a more absorbing interest. Adela Glynde, whom I had known as a fairy-like child and as a lanky schoolgirl, was returned to Northumberland in the radiance of her mature beauty. She was living with her father at Birby; and, so long as she remained in the country, historical research could pack up its maps and books.

At the time and ever since, I have regretted that Adela

was never painted by a competent artist. Later generations, depending on hear-say, become quickly sceptical of the beauty that ravished their elders; and I have always wanted an imperishable record of beauty that was not only flawless in itself but typical of the unmixed Scandinavian strain. If I had to express in one word the effect which Adela Glynde left at this time, I should choose the word "dazzling" to suggest the whiteness of her skin, the gleaming gold of her hair and the gentian blue of her eyes. You would hear a little gasp as she came into a room; and in London theatres I have seen pit and stalls standing up and jostling for a glimpse of her. Alas! There was no question of having her immortalized in paint or chalk. The Glyndes had almost gone short of food to educate and dress her; now her business was to marry; and, if she failed to find a husband, she must discover a means of earning her living. John Glynde was an ill-paid clergyman with a long family.

It was in 1912 that I returned for the second time; and, though she could have married a dozen men in the month after she came out, Adela postponed making a choice for two years. In the interval I believe she was supported by women who competed for the privilege of dressing her if this carried the privilege of attaching her to their party. "When she comes into a house," Lady Dennison said to me once, "it's like opening your doors and windows to the sun." And, though Adela was conscious of her beauty and of the power it gave her, this was only a delightful accident, conferring on her an advantage which she hesitated to use. When Harry Dennison invited her to become the chatelaine of Nateby, she excused herself on the double plea that she was not in love with him and that he was only in love with her

looks. They would continue to be friends, but, if he were honest with himself, he would recognize that they had no tastes in common. The title and the position, the place and all its pomp were not wasted on a girl who had been brought up to rank Nateby higher than Windsor, but she could not accept them as the result of a fortuitous infatuation.

With lesser loyalty to the men she rejected, Adela could have concocted a public farce out of the private tragedies to which she so unwillingly contributed. No one knows how many proposals she received; but I fancy that few men fell in love with her without proposing and that none met her without falling in love. At one time Punch Escott forswore wine and women to make himself worthy of her. Keith Helmsley, who had never, to the knowledge of man, received a rebuff, incontinently added an unexpected chapter to his experience of women. As one fell, three sprang to take his place. In a way all her own, Adela could usually keep a man's friendship even when he had failed to win her love; and, if any gave her time, she spared them disappointment by warning them in advance not to court it. I recall one night at Nateby when four of her rejected suitors were enjoying the hospitality of a fifth, all her friends still and the friends of one another.

What kind of man she wanted no one could guess. After a year she had received offers from high-born and humble, rich and poor, old and young; the professional charmer and the ingenuous boy tramped into sunless exile with the reformed rake and the natural ascetic. I doubt if Adela herself knew. Attractions, she told me, could not be explained; and no man had attracted her yet. The confession was hardly uttered before it ceased

to be true. When Peter Colyton drifted nonchalantly into the bewitched circle, Adela found in him a quality that was lacking in the rest of us. Young, handsome and debonair, a wit and an artist, rich and cultured, he fascinated by his brain no less than by his looks. I have never heard why he too was rejected, but I suspect that by now Adela was incapable of recognizing passion when she met it. I believe she said "no", when she meant "yes". I fancy that Jack Sebright plucked the fruit which Peter had ripened. And maybe, if Peter had asked her a second time, she would have given him a different answer; but his temperament forbade him to wait.

It is small wonder, I think, if I neglected historical research at this season. So disturbing was the presence of Adela Glynde that, even if I had not been in love with her myself, I must have watched the other moths fluttering to their destruction. I did not visit Nateby again until two years later, when Adela had become an international figure and her engagement was cabled throughout the English-speaking world. We were first intrigued, then disappointed, then resigned. About Sebright I could at first find out nothing; and, when I learned that he was a penniless artist, I wished that she had done better for herself. The wish was recalled when I saw them together, for Adela was aglow with the happiness that only comes once to any one. Seeing her, I was glad that she had not married Peter; I was glad that Punch Escott's title and Keith Helmsley's smile had not tempted her. I was glad, though I still wanted her, that I had not married her.

Harry Dennison gave a party to celebrate the engagement. In accepting the invitation, I honoured him for

sending it; and Adela I honoured yet more highly for making it possible. We were friends to the last; and for all of us it was the last meeting with three or four of the party. I was at Nateby when the Foreign Office ordered me back to duty. When I said good-bye to Harry, I was saying good-bye for ever; and, as I left before Sebright arrived, I had no chance to bid him a last farewell. When next I saw Peter, he had been shell-shocked. And Adela was praying for death and unable to die.

Had she a premonition that first night when she said that her happiness frightened her? Within a month Sebright was training with the Artists' Rifles; within a year he was dead. If she had, she did not allow it to depress her; and the finest tribute to her character was paid in the moment when four men who had failed to win her drank success to the one who had. I remember her speech in reply:

“Thank God for my friends. . . . Oh, but it can't be *right* for any one to be so happy!”

And I remember the scene which I afterwards vainly imagined would be the scene of my last appearance at Nateby. We were dining in the Chinese room, on grotesquely carved chairs round a table which the Dennison of the grand tour had sent to be lacquered in Peking. A dragon, suspended from the ceiling, gave us our light; and my prevailing impression is of gold and ivory. I forget Harry's speech of good wishes, but I remember the faces of the other men as Adela rose, herself a figure of gold and ivory, to reply. We none of us grudged Sebright his good fortune, but I fancy most of us felt that our lives would not be the same after this night. Wearying of abstinence, Punch Escott was

consoling himself in his accustomed way. Keith Helmsley murmured to me that it was time for the rest of us to think of settling down; and, when the Foreign Office telephoned that the European position was critical, I could see that Peter Colyton welcomed the news as a much-needed distraction.

They came into the courtyard as I set out to catch the night train at Newcastle. Lady Dennison waved to me from the protection of the hall, but Adela stood bare-armed and bare-headed by the door of the car, gently regretful that I should be called away but unsuspecting that any war could touch her. Punch, by now obstreperous and bloated in the light of the side-lamps, tried to push a bottle of brandy through the window. He was restrained by Keith and Peter. At the last moment Harry shook hands and told me to come again. I remember being struck by the good looks of the three men in contrast to Punch Escott.

I remember saying that, even if war broke out, we should not be dragged into it.

"I hope not, for all our sakes," said Harry. "I want to get you with your nose to the grindstone for the history of this place."

4

I SPENT the first year of the war in Saint Petersburg and came home in time to hear of Jack Sebright's death. I had one interview with Adela; and a statuette in gold and ivory could not have spoken less. Keith Helmsley was with her; and, as we walked away together, he gave me the latest news of our friends. Harry had transferred from the Northumberland Fusiliers to a machine-

gun section; Punch was driving an armoured car in Egypt; and Peter was in France. Keith told me in confidence that he was himself engaged to be married, but that no announcement would be made until his future father-in-law had agreed to a proper settlement. Though he said little in words, I divined that Keith was humbling his family pride by marrying some one of a different social position from his own; he was also being well-paid for his condescension. Nora, he told me, had naturally a good deal to learn, but he was ready to teach her. From the photograph which he shewed me I mistrusted the quality of her brains, but her meek beauty and languid eyes made me think that she would prove docile. They were married some time in 1916; and I lost sight of Keith until the armistice. Shortly after I had been transferred to Paris, I myself became engaged to the daughter of a Shropshire neighbour. We were married in London; and the letter in which Harry Dennison told me that he could not get leave to be my best man was the last that I ever had from him. By methods only known to himself he had transferred from his machine-gun section to the Tank Corps; later he transferred from the Tank Corps to the Air Force. In the early part of 1918 his mother wrote to apprise me of his death before I should see it in the official list. She wrote from London and begged me to visit her when next I was in England. A reference was made to my unfinished monograph on Nateby; and she assured me that I should always be welcome, whether she was in residence or not. From her choice of language I judged that she would not continue to live at Nateby without her son. I was hardly surprised when I read a few months after the armistice that the place was to let.

Acc. No: 1455

For the first time since eleven-hundred the Dennisons had failed to produce a distant cousin or a bastard son to carry on the line. I have always doubted whether Lady Dennison cared for the house or for its immolating tradition, but it was an incomparable background for the pretty American girl who came over in the seventies with a resolute ambition to carve herself a niche in English society. By now it had served its purpose; and Lady Dennison was pining for a smaller house, nearer to her friends, where she could glut her passion for bridge. Unhappily, the upkeep of Nateby was almost the same whether it was full or empty; and it was impossible to take a new house until a tenant had been found for the old. In the early months of the armistice, Lady Dennison made me her unpaid agent with instructions to find some one who would take Nateby off her hands.

If I failed to justify her confidence, I at least benefited by it to study a phase of social adjustment that was unique in English history. From the day when the first government-note was printed, I conceive of England as a gambling-hell in which the entire population, willy-nilly, with or without a knowledge of the rules, sat down to play poker in the dark. Prices soared; and wages soared in pursuit. Every one thought in millions. There spread a belief that a spring of new wealth was gushing and that every one must fill his tanks before the gush ended. Then, to take up my first figure, the lights were turned on; and the players stopped to calculate how they stood. Some discovered that they had money and nothing to buy with it; others that their money was gone and that they must make more by judicious selling. In the first year after the armistice, there was a wild scramble

to bring buyers and sellers together before the bubble of inflation burst.

You bought and sold against time in those shining days. The ruined owners of great estates sold before the market broke; the dazed possessors of mushroom fortunes converted their cash into houses, pictures and jewellery before a retroactive levy on war-profits could be introduced. To the fever of the gambling-hell succeeded the fever of the auction-room. Unless you bought or sold, you were out of the movement. If you lacked means to buy or things to sell, you looked for purses to cut.

I do not think the phrase is too strong for the operation it is intended to describe. Those who had lost everything in the war joined hands with those who had nothing to lose in hunting the native and alien rich who would enable them to enjoy the standard of luxury that the new rich had inherited from the new poor. In the communistic state of the armistice-months, one section had to pay in accordance with its means, the other was entitled to receive according to its wants. Keith Helmsley required money to spare him work and to support him in his parliamentary career; he was prepared to offer himself in exchange. At the other end of the scale, Punch Escott, who had by now run through his assets and exhausted his credit, asked only that some one should keep him supplied with food and drink; I cannot imagine what he offered in return. One woman who sprang into fame as an organizer in the war deflected her talents to charity in peace, thereby competing with those who encircled the rich for more personal and pressing reasons. I met in these months a succession of strange faces and was told that their owners had more

money than they could spend. Perhaps their wealth was exaggerated, perhaps they parted with it less easily than they had acquired it, perhaps their impulsive new friends found that even money could be purchased at too high a price: I noticed that the golden geese raised at home enjoyed shorter popularity than those imported from abroad.

"Any one here can tell a West Riding accent, but hardly any one knows Milwaukee from Boston," Lady Dennison told me. "I should have had no chance if I'd come from Huddersfield; but, once people had got over my being an American, they didn't seem to care what kind of American I was. Now, you go about much more than I do: what Americans are coming over?"

Sometimes I wondered whether to despise the more those who were only received for what could be squeezed out of them or those who opened their doors to any that could be squeezed. The humiliation was equal; and so was the cynicism. Equal too, however, was the benefit to both parties. I wonder now what has happened to those transient figures who became the talk and the laughing-stock of London for a season, taking vast houses, entertaining prodigally, entrenching themselves behind titles which they usually contrived to mangle and then disappearing unwept and unsung. Mrs. Logan J. Beamish, Mrs. Encott, Mrs. Irwin T. Reid: their names carry a date. It was in 1922 that the Beamishes swept down upon London; in 1923 they were routed by Mrs. Encott, who had spent a year studying their mistakes. At last, duly heralded from Chicago, Mrs. Irwin T. Reid reached London in 1924 by way of Rome and Paris.

The cut-purses met to consider their attack. Mrs. Reid knew no one, which was a drawback; and no one

knew Mrs. Reid, which was an advantage. She might be as disappointing as Mrs. Beamish or as disastrous as Mrs. Encott. Rumour said that she was richer than either and more ambitious than both; the evidence of eye-witnesses in Rome and Paris endorsed the rumour so far as it touched her ambition, explaining that she wished to go farther in a shorter time and that, whereas the others had selected, Mrs. Reid was concerned only to collect.

"She'll collect you all right," Peter Colyton, who had evidently been collected already, wrote from Paris. *"She wants to know everybody."*

I was on the point of putting her name before Lady Dennison, when I found that I was too late. While the cut-purses argued whether their new victim should be despoiled piecemeal or handed over intact to endow a national theatre, the victim had passed under the protection of Lady Dennison.

"I have succeeded in letting Nateby," she wrote, *"to a countrywoman of mine, a Mrs. Irwin T. Reid. She is very anxious to meet you, as I have told her that you know far more about the place than any one else. Be kind to her, if you get the chance. She has very few friends at present, though naturally I shall do my best to set her on her feet."*

At this time I had never seen Mrs. Reid, but I made a mental picture of her, signing the lease of Nateby with one hand and receiving in the other an interleaved, annotated copy of Lady Dennison's address-book.

How soon I received my first invitation I cannot remember. It would give Mrs. Reid real pleasure, she wrote, to have me come to Nateby. Lady Dennison had told her of the book I was writing; and she wished me to understand that I should be as welcome as if the

Dennisons were still there. My reply was, I trust, adequately gracious, but I was not eager to accept her hospitality until some one had experienced it first. Indeed, before I properly realized that the Dennison line was ended, I must have made up my mind that I would never go to Nateby again. To this day I cannot recall why Mrs. Irwin T. Reid or any one else was allowed to change it. The place, I knew, would be haunted by memories of Harry and of my own youth; and, even if the Dennisons had continued to live there, I felt that the glory would be departed from this, as from every other house of its size, after twenty-five years of death-duties and ten of war-taxation. Had this not been enough, I was far from being enchanted by the reports that soon reached me of Mrs. Reid's manner of entertaining. I have lived sufficiently long in the United States to appreciate Americans at their best; and in England, in Italy and in France I think I have seen them at their worst. During and after the Nateby Castle case, when I begged my friends not to imagine that Mrs. Reid's Christmas party was typical of England, they begged me in their turn to believe that Mrs. Reid was not typical of America. This I knew without their assurance; and my friends and I have agreed amicably that she and her party were very perfectly typical of something less engaging than either England or America; that is, the united forces of the richly ambitious and the indigently greedy.

Mrs. Reid's plan of campaign had the charm of simplicity. I fancy that for her first weeks in England she explored the utmost extravagances of her predecessors and set herself, for the rest, to exceed them. It was from Punch Escott that I heard she had installed a bar

in the Constable's Tower, converted the riding-school into a box-room and was prepared to entertain any one that, in his phrase, "knew a soft thing when he saw it." Immediately and for many months I found parties being arranged to sample Mrs. Reid's hospitality. And, even before the first spies returned from the promised land, I had determined that my ignorance of Nateby in the Anglo-Saxon period must be left unspoiled.

5

SINCE I began to frame this defence I have been trying to record with scrupulous good-faith my contemporary impressions and recollections of persons and events that changed literally out of recognition in the space of a few moments. Whether or no I can fix my images on the canvas, I can and must paint perhaps half-a-dozen portraits of Mrs. Reid, though—when all is said and done—she played only a minor part in the scandalous gathering for which she was held responsible. I must try to depict her as she threatened to materialize from the accounts of Punch Escott, as she fulfilled her threat when I sat next to her at dinner in London and as she exceeded it on our arrival in Northumberland. I must shew her strange reversion to type and her reaction from her reversion. I must explain how one woman in less than a week inspired me with disgust, exasperation, bewilderment, compassion, honest liking and—once more—exasperated disgust, though she was herself unconscious of any change. My painting will be dispassionate, if nothing else. I am only afraid of confusing the earlier impressions with the later.

What image, then, did I form when my wife and I

dined with Punch Escott and I was told that Mrs. Irwin T. Reid, who wished to meet me, was to be of the party?

The introduction was by now more flattering than original: in a busy life Mrs. Reid seemed to devote an appreciable portion of her day to telling people that she wanted to meet me; and, from a mulish strain in my character, the more often I heard it the more obstinately I resolved to avoid her. I failed because Punch, who knew my feelings, played me false. His invitation, which referred darkly to "important business", did not mention Mrs. Reid. I was shaking hands with her before I realized that, in Peter Colyton's phrase, I had been "collected". And I had been detached from my wife before I could put her on her guard.

In appearance at least Mrs. Reid was utterly unlike what I had expected. Small and fair, with dusty hair and pale eyes, she reminded me of a bleached blonde doll incongruously cased in the silver scales of a mermaid and loaded with pearls that on any one but the wife of a millionaire would have been condemned as false. At first sight she seemed frail and rather forlorn; it was only when she spoke that I detected the metallic ring of plutocracy. Then I realized that she had bought everything she wanted hitherto and probably fancied that no one was without his price.

"I'm real pleased to meet you, Mr. Kingsbury," she exclaimed as we shook hands. "Now don't go tell yourself that's just my Yankee way of speaking. Ever since I took Nateby, I've been saying I must have you come. Stay as long as you like! Ask who you like to meet you. If you want to be gay . . . or high-brow . . . or grand. . . . Lord Escott can tell you what grand parties I can give . . ."

She was skimming the *Peerage* of its cream when Punch came to my rescue by bringing up some one else to be introduced and I addressed myself to the ordinary perils of dining with the least dependable of hosts. These risks I should describe, in order of importance, as about half-a-dozen. You never knew whether Punch would begin the evening drunk, though you might be sure how he would end it. You never knew how Punch's guests would end or begin. You never knew what kind of women your wife might be required to meet. You never knew what Punch would say. You never knew what Punch would do. You never knew what Punch's guests would say or do. I looked about me cautiously. Lady Escott, as usual, was not present; and I could see no one who was taking her place. Every one seemed to be sober; and Punch himself was on his best behaviour.

"I must talk to you later," Mrs. Reid called out as I made my escape. "What I want . . ."

Without being told, I felt I knew what she wanted: it was to hear all about the castle without going to the trouble of reading a book or learning from Mason, the Dennisons' old steward; and to that end Punch Escott had been bribed or bidden to bring about a meeting with my unimportant self. Imposing names were produced as a guarantee of good faith, though their bearers for the most part contrived to slip out of their promises before the party assembled; and from the first moment of our meeting I was left to ponder the wisdom of those who said that, when Mrs. Irwin T. Reid wanted a person, she got him.

Even now I believe I might have escaped if my wife had not been collected as an ally against me. Enid had never stayed at Nateby; and she had not sat next to Mrs.

Irwin T. Reid throughout a dinner that I thought would never end. 'This is not to charge the woman with lack of versatility. Failing to engage me in a flirtation, she discussed religion and science, art and travel. As, however, her thoughts on religion covered only the faiths she had discarded, as science for her meant only the diet she was now following, as art and travel were restricted to the book she had been urged to write on her wanderings, we returned from every starting-point to a new discussion of Mrs. Reid. A visit to Nateby threatened to become an infinity of this; and I resolved to warn Enid before the trap could close on her. When we all met in the drawing-room, however, I found my wife sitting with Mrs. Reid, discussing Nateby and the Dennisons; and she hailed me with the announcement that we were both being invited to Northumberland for Christmas. I countered with a hint that we had always spent Christmas at Whitchurch; and Enid, mistaking my selfish attempt to escape Mrs. Reid for an altruistic wish not to upset my father-in-law's usual family-gathering, exclaimed at once that we must not get into a rut and that this was a marvellous opportunity for me to see my beloved Nateby again.

"This sweet wife of yours," said Mrs. Reid, "has been telling me all about the wonderful book you're writing . . ."

I disclaimed all intention of writing any kind of book and would have denied all interest in Nateby if Enid had not already betrayed that I wanted to fill the missing Anglo-Saxon chapter in the history of the castle. At once the library was made over to me, with the services of Mrs. Reid's secretary. My wife expressed my thanks for me and at the same time barred my retreat. I tried

to comfort myself with the reflection that the house was big and that in a game of hide-and-seek with my hostess I could establish and maintain my lead for the whole of our visit.

"Then you'll let me know about trains later on," Enid was saying, as I drifted away to be alone with my misgivings.

"Now just what kind of party shall I make it?," Mrs. Reid asked, with hands outstretched for paper and a pencil.

Her pale brows were knitted in thought. I could imagine her wearing that expression as she stood before a soda-fountain in her home-town, wondering what variety of drink to buy.

CHAPTER TWO

"PEOPLE 'OF BIRTH AND BREEDING', SO-CALLED . . ."

I

"*PEOPLE of 'birth and breeding', so called . . .*"

The credit for the phrase must be given to Mr. Justice Warburton. During the "Nateby Castle case" he wore it threadbare as an ironical description of the men and women who were being forced into most unwelcome notoriety by the criminal indiscretion of one person and the insane rancour of another. "People of 'birth and breeding', so-called" was our generic description; and we were sub-divided into "*a peer of ancient lineage*", "*a distinguished man of letters*", "*a soldier with a creditable war-record*", "*a former ornament of His Majesty's Diplomatic Service*" and so on. Mr. Justice Warburton was resolved that we should be heartily ashamed of ourselves and that all people of birth and breeding, real and not mere "so-called", should be heartily ashamed of us.

The learned judge admitted no degrees of responsibility or guilt: men and women, old and young, all who were included in that calamitous Christmas party at Nateby Castle were equally to blame. If my memory serves me, he hinted that Mrs. Reid should be deported;

the rest of us, he hoped, would be ostracized for the term of our natural lives.

I find an ironic amusement in the thought that providence, at the last moment, gave me two chances of escape and that I neglected them both. Ten days before Christmas I retired to bed with influenza; and, the day before I set out, my uncle John met with a serious accident in his car. I hesitated about leaving London till I knew that he was out of danger; and I debated for the twentieth time whether I could face Mrs. Reid while I was still weak from fever. Then the trivial considerations that mould our fates persuaded me to keep my engagement: everything was packed, we had given the servants leave; and, if the worst came to the worst, I could always get back in six or seven hours. I instructed my uncle's nurse to telegraph for me, if there were a change for the worse, and so set out for King's Cross.

“I wonder what kind of party she *has* made,” murmured Enid.

“An incongruous one,” I answered without hesitation.

Mrs. Reid, I felt, had not been long enough in England to adjust her values; and with the arrogance of the immeasurably rich she probably felt that, so long as her guests were well-fed, it did not matter if they were ill-assorted. Her hospitality, indeed, might be savoured in advance from the moment when we found a reserved coach and two men-servants in charge of commissariat: they offered us sherry and biscuits as we steamed north at half-past ten in the morning and they continued to press food and drink upon us until we reached Nateby.

I remember, too, savouring in advance the incongruity which I had warned my wife to expect. As we were almost all acquainted with one another, there was no

reason why we should not all be acquainted with her; but, as I strolled along the corridor and put my head in at one compartment after another I could not understand what, if any, principle of selection had been followed. The standard greeting was a surprised "*You* here?"; it was answered by an equally surprised "Well, I never thought I should see *you*!"

On reflection, I believe that the visitors' book had been handed over with the address-book and that Mrs. Reid was arguing that people who had been glad to meet ten years before must be glad to meet again. Subtracting those who had been killed and adding those who had married the survivors, she seemed to be reconstructing the party which Harry Dennison had assembled to celebrate Adela Glynde's engagement. My wife and I were the first to arrive at the station. We were followed by Peter Colyton and the Helmsleys, who were followed in turn by Adela herself. The only stranger, indeed, was a young countrywoman of Mrs. Reid's, who announced herself as Miss Jocelyn Arley and explained that she had been invited to taste the joys of "an old-fashioned English Christmas."

I wondered if surprise saved the others from realizing the irony of such a gathering. It was the first time in ten years that we had all met in the same place at the same time. For eight of those ten years I fancy we had deliberately avoided one another.

As it is the fate of all things to become older and of all things living to deteriorate after passing their prime, I consider that mankind exhibits amazing ingenuity in

shirking the idea of decay and death. It is far easier to die with a good grace than to grow old with resignation; we spoil the present by sighing for the past; the people and places that we loved in youth we are inclined to eschew in middle age for fear of disillusion. We like to live on our memories.

I believe this tendency is strongest in those who find their memories sharply divided by such a line as the late war. Life before 1914 was so rich and careless, the art of living was so well understood and practised, that our later conditions seem a clumsy makeshift. Nevertheless, since we cannot recreate the old splendour, we can at least refuse to look on it in its decline.

“They say the lion and the lizard keep

The halls where Jamshyd gloried and drank deep.”

I have no taste for sitting with a stricken Jamshyd in a corner of his barren halls, talking of that great hunter Bahram, now buried beneath the stamping heels of the wild ass. I had no wish, in 1918, to meet the sparse survivors of 1914. I preferred to live on my memories. And so, till Mrs. Reid forced us together, did the others.

We had been meeting, inevitably, by twos and threes. Whenever I was in England, I went to see Adela; and, when I married, I urged my wife to court her friendship. We were not received with enthusiasm. For about a year, Adela was like a woman in a trance. Then she roused and began to face life like a woman who has an account to settle with God. In her appearance I could detect no change; and men continued to fall in love with her as in the days when she dawned on Northumberland. The old radiance, however, was gone; she had only contempt for fools who laid siege to a dead heart, contempt for herself in continuing to live, contempt for

those who refused to share her universal contempt. I have no doubt that she despised Keith Helmsley when he married for money. She despised me when I married for love. She despised Peter Colyton when he omitted to marry. What she wanted us to do I cannot imagine; but, as life had come to an end for her, she seemed resentful that any one else should find it sweet. I resolved at short intervals that I could do nothing more with her; and always my resolution broke down when I remembered that I had once been in love with her and that she was alone, wasted and heartbroken.

For a reason that I never heard, she had quarrelled with her family; and, when some one left her a few hundreds, she settled in London by herself and worked among the poor. The suffering which she witnessed and the privations which she imposed on herself inflamed her already feverish resentment; and from time to time she emerged to castigate the spendthrifts and voluptuaries who defiled the world which Jack Sebright had died to cleanse. Her temper and language were fanatical. I should never have been surprised to find her leading a revolution; and it would have been one of the bloodiest in history. At such seasons we debated what should be done with her. If she could only fall in love again, she would forget Sebright; if she could only forget him, she might fall in love again. She was meant to marry and to bear children, but I sometimes fancied that she must have sworn never to marry.

Meanwhile, in everything but looks, Adela was deteriorating; and for that reason I was not anxious to meet her. I was not anxious to meet Punch Escott, who never had far to fall from grace and had already fallen. I was not anxious to meet Keith Helmsley in his

hour of prosperity nor Peter Colyton in adversity. They were in their prime at Harry Dennison's last party; and I wanted to keep my memory of that party untarnished.

Thanks to Mrs. Reid, I was to meet them all. Punch Escott had not appeared by the time that we started, but this was only in keeping with his general eccentricity; and we had enough discordant elements without him. Under her marmoreal calm, I caught a hint of uneasiness in Adela's manner as she turned from me to Keith and from Keith to Peter. On the plea of wanting a carriage that was not “contaminated by tobacco”, she shut herself up with a typewriter and a wallet of papers before the train was out of the station. My wife went with the Helmsleys; Peter concentrated his attention on the commissariat; and I was left to instruct little Miss Arley in the biographies of her fellow guests and in the lore of an “old-fashioned English Christmas.” I found her an attractive companion, refreshingly eager and disarmingly ingenuous. She had never before been in England; she had never stayed in a haunted house; and she had never met “an English lord.” All three ambitions, on the promise of “Cousin Henrietta”, were to be gratified simultaneously.

“I hope you won't be disappointed,” I said, with thoughts of Punch Escott.

“I certainly shan't,” she assured me. “I'm crazy about England. Your cunning lil trains. . .”

She hooked my umbrella over the communication-cord to steady herself against the rocking of the coach and looked about her with unconcealed delight. I have more than once indulged the fancy that her act was symbolical, that she and I were being given a chance of cheating destiny. If one of us had pulled the cord, if we

had delayed or disorganized the party . . . Since the early hours of last Christmas morning, I have seen and heard nothing of her. Did she, as she journeyed back to King's Cross alone, remember that tiny act and the salvation that might have flowed from it? Did she recall my saying that the privilege of stopping the train would cost her five pounds? "Not worth it," she decided at the time. I wonder what she thinks now. . . .

We were still gossiping in the corridor when Peter Colyton emerged to sing the praises of Mrs. Reid's sherry. If I had not been warned beforehand, he—of all the party—would have been the most unexpected. Poor Peter! When I was a bachelor, I saw a good deal of him in Paris and Vienna, whither he came each year to hear the latest music. In those days he had a reputation for wit and was a welcome guest with any ambassador I served. I stayed with him in Northumberland, we met each year at Nateby. During the war I lost sight of him; and, when I returned to England, I found only a rather ghastly caricature of the Peter who had jested and talked and played the piano to me half the night. Whether he had technically been "shell-shocked", I never heard, as no one was allowed to mention the war in his presence. On the rare occasions when I met him, he made pathetic efforts to recapture his old wit; but I noticed that he only succeeded late at night, when he was almost too full of drink to stand. At other times he was silent and brooding, socially useless and sullenly aware of his uselessness. I had seen him leave a party in the middle and without explanation; more often I had seen his glass emptying and emptying again till his dulled brain was momentarily fired. He still played the piano, but only to himself; and once, in an

outburst of drunken candour, he told me that music alone said all that he wanted to say about life but that what he wanted to say was unfit for human ears. Wiser than his critics in the first months of the war, he had proclaimed frankly, I believe, that he was unfitted to be a soldier. Superficially, he disproved his own words by serving for three and a half years, receiving promotion and being mentioned in despatches; but, though Captain Colyton, M.C., returned safely a month after the armistice, I always felt that the dreamy, whimsical, charming Peter of my youth had been done to death and that a stranger had seized his body. It is hardly surprising that I preferred to live on my memories of the Peter who had waved good-bye to me when I left Nateby in 1914. I wondered why, with his new hatred of meeting people, he had allowed himself to be included in this party; and I learned that, as I had been lured by the bait of the library, he had been snared by a promise of some early church-music.

“I said she’d collect you,” he reminded me. “This is to be a high-brow party. Professor Shapland’s coming from Scotland. We shall have to work very hard.”

In preparation for future efforts, he replenished his glass with sherry and described a few of the parties which Mrs. Reid had already given. They had been “sporting”, they had been “cultured”, they had been “Bohemian”, they had been “old English”; for one she would collect authors, for another politicians. As one retired diplomatist could hardly make the present gathering “diplomatic”, Peter decided that it would be “musical” or “learned” according to the relative importance which she attached to him and to Professor Shapland.

"She does you well," he allowed. "I suppose she sees that no one would come to her in cold blood. Where's that fellow gone to with the sherry?"

While Peter set out to track the commissariat, I opened my paper and tried to forget my mounting sense of despair. Our week at Nateby was going to be worse than anything I had imagined; and I felt we should be lucky if we escaped without an explosion. The party would have been difficult enough had we all been in our best form, but we were physically and mentally out of condition. I was still invertebrate from influenza; I was told that Adela had recently experienced a breakdown; and Peter looked as if the gentlest push would throw him off his balance. Poor Peter! He had been so good-looking before his cheeks fell in and his eye-sockets became so hollow. Now he looked a nervous wreck. His black hair was long and unkempt; his eyes were bloodshot; and his whole face twitched. He had shrunk, too; and his thin, musician's hands were tremulous and yellow from the cigarettes that he was always lighting and throwing away. In a poor class, the prize for looks must have gone to Keith Helmsley, with his waving brown hair and too perfect features; but, though his brown eyes seemed as happy, though he smiled as winningly as ever, I felt that he too was in some way ill at ease. His manner of flirting with his wife in public reminded me of a boy whistling to keep his courage up.

"People of 'birth and breeding', so-called"!

When I had finished my paper, I stretched my legs along the corridor and studied my fellow-travellers. There was nothing of birth and less than nothing of breeding about Nora Helmsley; but some one had taught her how to dress, some one would no doubt teach her

how to speak and for the present her husband was teaching her how to remain silent. In repose she had the languid grace of a manikin; at first sight her pale face and grey eyes afforded an intriguing contrast to her raven-black hair and scarlet lips, but, when I found my attention wandering from her, I discovered that there was no intelligence in the widely spaced eyes and no character in the wistful mouth. She might arouse interest but she could not maintain it. If she had been capable of unhappiness, Keith would have made her unhappy by his infidelities, but I doubt if she could feel anything but physical pain. When we were left together for a moment, I tried to draw her into conversation and was disastrously reminded of Eliza Doolittle in Shaw's *Pygmalion*. Nora had been taught gentility: her opinions were as impeccable as the language in which she expressed them. She had met Mrs. Reid in Rome, Paris and London, “which only shews you how small the world is”; she thought this would be a funny sort of party, “but, as I always say, it takes all kinds to make a world”; and, when Keith returned and dissented from one of her threadbare opinions, she asserted that life would be very dull if everybody always thought the same.

I lingered in that compartment for half an hour, morbidly and illegitimately fascinated by the tragi-comedy of this marriage. They were not in love with each other, Keith and Nora. I supposed that she married him in the expectation of entering a more splendid world; and he married her in the assurance that she would maintain him. In upbringing, in cultivation, in tastes and in ways of thought they had nothing in common. So far as I could see, they would continue without anything in common, Keith ever writhing at her provincialisms and

Nora chafing at his affectations. And this was the end of a girl who had dreamed of meeting a fairy prince; apart from his public career, this was the end of a man whom I had waited to see setting the world ablaze since the time when it was the fashion for young men to copy his clothes and for women, young, old and middle-aged, to fall in love with him.

My little friend Miss Arley entered the carriage. When I introduced her to Nora Helmsley, she said that she was pleased to meet her. On this, Nora turned to Keith and asked, in continuation of some secret controversy, why he objected to this phrase; and Keith, in considerable embarrassment, tried to explain that "good English" may be "bad United States" and that the idiom of one country may be the vulgarism of another.

"For example," he explained to Miss Arley, "it's idiomatic to speak of a bus and a taxi. If you spoke of the 'phone', though, or called a photograph a 'snap', or talked about 'corsets' when you meant 'stays', you'd put yourself beyond the pale."

"But, say," remonstrated Miss Arley, "d'you divide these things just arbitrarily?"

"It's not that 'phone' is any more vulgar than 'bus'," Keith answered, "but by a mysterious working of providence the people who say 'phone' are always incredibly more vulgar than the people who say 'bus.' Funny, isn't it?"

He smiled winningly on Miss Arley and offered her a cigarette. Looking past him, I saw Nora's pale cheeks flushing. At first I thought she was jealous of the admiration he was manifesting towards an undeniably attractive girl; then I saw her brows contracting, her lips moving. I realized, without waiting for confirma-

tion, that Nora habitually abbreviated “telephone” to “‘phone.” She was probably resolving to cure herself. Perhaps the frown expressed her difficulty in grasping why so genteel a word as “corsets” should be rejected in favour of the indelicate “stays.”

Poor Nora! I was sorry for her at all times and chiefly when Keith lashed her in public; but I could not remain patient with her. ‘*You are seductively beautiful,*’ I always wanted to tell her; ‘*you are beautifully dressed. You could drive men mad with longing if only you did not speak. Remember your Æsop’s fables!*’

When I had exhausted my half-hearted attempt to atone for Keith’s brutality, I sat back in my corner and studied little Miss Arley’s manner and appearance. Of her birth and breeding I knew and still know nothing, but she bore the marks of race in the exquisite moulding of her feet and hands. Fair, fresh and blue-eyed, she looked a delightful schoolgirl: if she painted or powdered herself, the traces were not visible to my masculine eyes; and I marked her highly as a specimen, new to my experience, of a girl too young to be modern.

From force of habit or at the spur of interest, Keith was laying himself out to fascinate her; and I was maliciously diverted to note his failure. Little Miss Arley would meet him as a friend, was gratified that he took trouble to amuse her; but she was not going to cheapen herself by flirting in public or private with another woman’s husband. Listening with one ear to their conversation, I heard her telling Keith of her home in Minneapolis and her involved relationship with “cousin Henrietta”, of a sister who had married a Chicago lawyer and of their twin daughters.

I have seldom seen a man so inexpressibly bored.

3

PETERBOROUGH, Grantham, Doncaster. I spent the morning in one compartment after another, glancing at the papers, gossiping with any one who would gossip with me and wondering if the others shared my misgivings for the comfort of the party that lay ahead of us. My first hypothesis had broken down when I found that the Helmsleys were quartering themselves on Nateby as a convenient house-of-call on their way to a political tour of Roxburghshire; and I discovered that Adela's friendship with Mrs. Reid dated only from the day when they met fortuitously in the waiting-room of the same psychoanalyst.

"I wanted somewhere to go for Christmas," she told me. "And I thought I should like one last sight of Nateby. I'm going abroad quite soon. There's more scope."

From her tone I judged that Adela did not mean to come back. I never enquired what her work was, but I believe she befriended young girls who had been led astray.

"I hope it won't be for long," I said.

She shrugged her shoulders:

"There's not much to keep me here. I've not much reason to love this country. And I've been ill, I want new surroundings. It's nice to see you all again," she added more graciously.

"Though we've all *changed* a good bit," I could not help saying. "Poor old Peter's looking ill."

Adela's expression hardened:

"Small wonder if you consider the life he leads."

“I wish you’d take him in hand and persuade him to live a different kind of life,” I said.

York, Darlington, Newcastle. We ate and dozed and ate again. A quarrel broke out between Adela, who turned in disgust from the banquet which Mrs. Reid was providing, and Peter, who maintained that self-indulgence was the mainspring of human activity. I have confused memories of a debate in which five or six voices argued simultaneously and no one finished his sentences:

“Eating and drinking themselves stupid . . .”

“Men don’t work for money; they work first for the security, then for the power, then for the pleasures that money can buy . . .”

“Beasts of the field . . .”

“Say, can I have some iced water, please?”

“The game-pie is highly commended . . .”

“Designing a beautiful meal is no less an art than designing a beautiful dress . . .”

“I don’t know anything about art, but I know what I like . . .”

“America has already prohibited alcohol; it is trying to prohibit tobacco. When the purity-leagues and watch-committees have robbed life of all interest . . .”

The general debate narrowed to an acrimonious dialogue as Peter proceeded with his plea for polite hedonism. Adela interrupted with fierce references to her own rescue-work. I heard Nora soliloquizing blandly to the effect that there were sad and unpleasant things in the world, but that she could not see what good any one did by talking about them. And then Adela stalked away from the table, plucking at my sleeve and begging me audibly to put Peter under restraint.

“Half-drunk already! Not that it matters, I suppose,

what time you choose if you're going to make a beast of yourself, but in front of that Arley child . . . We don't want her to go back to America with the idea that people like Peter . . ."

I had some sandwiches sent to Adela's compartment and set myself to mollify Peter, who had discovered by now that he had been publicly insulted and was threatening to take the first train back to London as soon as we reached Newcastle. I urged Adela to make allowances for a man whose conduct was not to be judged by ordinary standards. And I dropped Miss Arley a hint that several of us had still to be regarded as convalescents. We reached our journey's end with our numbers intact; and it is interesting to recall that, as I had prevented Miss Arley from inadvertently pulling the communication-cord, so now I kept Peter from taking his temper and himself off at Newcastle. If I had not exerted myself to make peace, it is probable that there would have been no "Nateby Castle case."

While our coach was shunted to await the branch-line train, I strolled up and down the platform looking for Punch Escott. Enid joined me; and we exchanged rueful smiles in contemplation of the ordeal to which we had exposed ourselves. For the honour of the country, we determined to keep up appearances before Mrs. Reid and her little cousin, but it was not easy to keep up appearances when Keith Helmsley was surreptitiously snubbing his wife, when Adela was riding roughshod over her old friends and when Peter was morose, gay and fretful by turns. Our difficulties, too, would not begin till Punch joined us.

Since I began this chronicle, I have attempted and destroyed at least a dozen sketches of a man who never-

theless ought not to be hard of portrayal. The facts of Punch Escott's life are well-ascertained; his character is simple; and the biggest riddle that he presents is that his friends remain constant to him. At school he was something of an athlete, but hard training proved irreconcilable with the pursuit of pleasure; and, when we met again at Oxford, he was studying to include self-indulgence among the fine arts. In common with his other friends, I made periodical efforts to check him; but the force of inheritance and example was too strong for me. An Escott was one of the original members of the Hell Fire Club; Punch's great-grandfather and grandfather were notorious for their gallantries and excesses. With the mending of manners in the later nineteenth century, the rake ceased to be an object of admiration; and Punch's father conducted his debauches in private. They were not, however, hidden from the eyes of his son; and Punch grew up to the faith that there was but one life, a thing of women and wine, and that man could not begin it too soon nor continue it too late. He was expelled from Eton for an intrigue with a Windsor shop-girl; he was sent down from Oxford for a similar escapade; and, though there was no one to discover and punish his amours in London, this is no reason for thinking that he discontinued them. When I tried to set his feet in a different path, he talked of his tainted blood; when I searched for his vulnerable point, I discovered that he had no ambition, no ideals, no shame and no remorse.

I believe it was the frankness and completeness of his depravity that attached me to him. In a timid and hypocritical world, Punch never pretended. “ Only one life, old boy,” he used to tell me; “ enjoy yourself before

the worms get at you." When he drank, he never praised the bouquet of the wine. He never sentimentalized about the women who trod on one another's heels in their passage through his life. If they met with disaster, he left them to their fate; and, if he never boasted, neither did he ever hold his tongue. I have good reason to believe that, if he possessed a conscience, he would have on it the death of a young woman who committed suicide without apparent reason; but, when Punch—travelling *incognito* till the scandal should have blown over—came to see me in Vienna, he was only concerned to feel that he had narrowly escaped the dock. "Serious business, old boy, if I'd been nabbed. Life's short enough as it is, without spending half of it in quod. The worms get you in their own time, so you must enjoy yourself while you can." When he married, it was almost literally at the point of a pistol. "I was in the deuce of a position, old boy," he told me. "Girl's father threatened to blow my head off if I didn't come to heel. Well, there was no point in letting the worms get at me before my time." . . .

If I am right in thinking of Punch Escott as a man without a moral sense, I believe it is my interest in a rare specimen of humanity that has kept me from breaking with him. He has ceased for many years to amuse me; and I no longer see him as the predestined victim of his father's sins. For an interval of about a year, he divested himself of his inheritance and broke the evil tradition of his house. "Dice loaded against me, old boy," he used to say in the days when he was under the spell of Adela Glynde. "Rotten stock. Tainted blood. I can pull up, though, as well as another. Never had the inducement before. But, if a *decent* woman took me in

hand, you'd see me a new man yet before the worms get at me."

How long any "decent woman" would have dominated him I can make no guess. Within a week of Adela's final "no" he had gone back to his old ways. He refrained from attitudinizing over himself as a lost soul or a disappointed man. "She's right, old boy, she's right," he told me. "I should never have made her happy; and, with my record, I should never be the right husband for any woman. Adela's too full of ideals; and my only ideal is to have a good time while I can." With that, he trotted off—I see him in these years always moving at a trot—in pursuit of a woman unencumbered with ideals. I had hopes that the moral shock of the war might sober him, forgetting that he was a man without a moral sense. He took it in his stride, as he had taken his brief enslavement to Adela and as he was soon to take the marriage that was offered him as an alternative to sudden and violent death. I have never met Lady Escott. "I've only met her once myself, old boy," Punch informed me. "We parted at the door of the registrar's office; and I shouldn't know her again if I saw her."

When I first knew the family, there was enough money to pay for Punch's costliest fancies; and as a young man he delighted in surrounding himself with fellows of his own kidney. "You can't be jolly by yourself, old boy," he told me. "I want a crowd. I want to go down singing in chorus. Bad business to face the worms by yourself." His unvarying refrain may have been a trick of speech or he may have been haunted by morbid fears of death. Later, he caroused alone because he could not afford to entertain his friends. Later still,

he allowed himself to be entertained by any one that cared to add him to a collection of human curiosities; and, as his reputation was not confined to Great Britain, he lived intermittently at the expense of such women as Mrs. Irwin T. Reid. Had I not the authority of little Miss Arley for the statement that she had never met an "English lord" but that the omission was to be repaired at Nateby?

It amused me to think of George Frederick Aloysius, tenth Viscount Escott, the descendant of Rake-hell Escott and himself not unworthy of the title, reduced now to the position of "tame peer" or "resident English lord" for Mrs. Reid's more cosmopolitan parties. When our train steamed out of Newcastle without our discovering Punch on board, I reflected that perhaps it would be premature to describe him as "tame."

4

THE preparations for our reception at Nateby station were on a level with those for our comfort in the train. There were, as Peter Colyton demonstrated, cars for the guests, cars for their luggage, cars for their maids, cars for their maids' luggage, cars in reserve to collect guests, luggage and maids if the first string should break down, cars to collect the fragments of the reserve cars.

We distributed ourselves as spaciouly as we could, with no more than two passengers to a car, and began our eight-mile drive across the moors. It was an evening of intermittent moon-light; and, when the cloud-banks melted, I found the familiar road unfolding like the road of a dream. Every cottage, every sheep-cote, every cairn and every boghole was there as I remembered it;

half-asleep after the heat and strain of the journey, I should hardly have been surprised if Harry Dennison had hailed me from a knoll by the wayside. I should hardly have been surprised if the car had changed to a couple of moorland ponies and I had found myself thundering along the Birby turnpike with the news that the barbarians had broken through the Wall or that a courier was arrived from Rome with despatches from the emperor to his governor-general. Then I realized that Harry was dead; and, still dreaming, I wondered how Nateby had survived the last of the Dennisons. I should hardly have been surprised if, at the end of the eight miles, Enid had exclaimed: “There’s nothing here!”

Rousing at the thought, I prayed that I should not find the castle changed or spoiled. The magic of the Wall had invaded my spirit again; and the moorland on either side was peopled with the ghosts of grim legionaries and howling savages. Wild men with painted bodies and long hair, the wild priests of wild gods opposed once more their ineffectual bows and arrows to the gleaming might of victorious Rome. Wild men crept back to watch the Wall building. They crept back again as the Wall crumbled. Then a new race of wild men in winged casques poured down from the north; and for five centuries, until Nateby rose on the ruins of the Wall, native Briton and deserted Roman, invading Saxon and raiding norseman had mingled and spilled their blood in a missing chapter of history. The old enthusiasm returned to me as I espied far off a cluster of lights. The great square of the keep defined itself against the silver of the sky. The fortress that had kept ward since Rufus fell to an assassin’s arrow was watching

unmoved while invaders in motor-cars raced up to its impregnable doors.

"Now that I'm here, you won't find it easy to get me away," I warned my wife.

"I'm glad to hear it. I was responsible for bringing you here. There were moments in the train when I thought you couldn't face it."

"That's all over. Peter was a little difficult; and Adela has become rather inhuman, but if we make up our minds to pull together . . . You're not tired?"

"I'm surprised that we've come eight miles without being offered anything to eat or drink," she laughed. "I expected a man on the running-board with a plate of sandwiches and a thermos-flask."

This temporary breach in an otherwise unbroken chain of surfeiting hospitality was quickly forgotten when we drove into the courtyard and were received in the hall by a row of men and a loaded table that reminded me of the buffet at a fashionable wedding-reception. And the tension of the long journey was forgotten, too, by the time we had changed our clothes and assembled in the long gallery. There was still no sign of Punch Escott, but within two minutes of our arriving without him Mrs. Reid exhibited characteristic determination by despatching her secretary to the telephone and ordering her to remain there until the truant had been run to earth at his house or club. In the manner of a chairman at a public dinner, our hostess then read out telegrams of regret from those who were unable to accept her invitation; and, like passengers on a tourist-ship, we were given a programme of the festivities which had been arranged for our amusement.

I was relieved to find that the party would be small. In addition to those who had come from London, there were only Professor Shapland and his wife, though the neighbourhood in a fifty-mile radius was being worked bare for the dinners and dances of the coming week. I believe that my mood of misgiving lifted from the moment when I heard in the train that the Shaplands were joining us from Scotland. My friendship with the little professor goes back so far that I cannot remember when we first met; but for twenty years, if I have doubted whether a party would amuse me, I have shed my doubts on hearing that he is to be present. By now he must be a man of seventy, but for the first fifty years of his life he shut himself up in Cambridge and only began to develop his social gifts at a time when most men are gradually withdrawing from society. It is to my credit that I first took him racing and instructed him in the mysteries of form. Enid taught him to dance. And most of his friends have contributed to broaden his outlook. “My wife and I,” he is accustomed to say, “are old people; we have lived a retired life; many things that are household words to you are words and *only* words to us. We hear of night-clubs, for instance . . .” I had him taken to one, where in company with several of his scandalized pupils he was the victim of a police-raid. I got him tickets for a prize-fight and arranged for him to “walk on” in a crowd in a revue. I am not sure that, when Mrs. Reid was arranging her Christmas party, I did not ask to have him included.

From the list of those who were “mad or drunk or both” I do not recall that Mr. Justice Warburton excluded the professor or Mrs. Shapland; and in looking back on the four days’ nightmare of the trial I remember wishing

that I could put these two witnesses in the box and ask the learned judge whether, on their record or appearance, they fitted his facile suggestion. If he intended his words to be taken literally, he may be interested to know that the Shaplands have been teetotallers, from inclination, since childhood; and, if he had ever pitted his wits in argument with the professor or had read any of his books, I doubt if he would have hinted that his formidable antagonist was mad or deluded or untruthful or incapable of weighing testimony. I feel, however, with the highest regard for British justice, that Sir Lawrence Warburton found it easier to indulge in conventional reproof than to face allegations beyond the range of his normal experience. In one of his interruptions he referred contemptuously to "the fourth dimension"; I am ready to believe that the Royal Courts of Justice would fall like the walls of Jericho if the High Court Bench admitted that there could be anything beyond the first three dimensions. This only confirms me in the opinion, which I expressed to Adela Glynde before she embarked on her ill-starred action, that certain cases, however good in themselves, are unsuited to the limited intelligence and sympathy of a British court. It was the professor, of course, who was labelled as "a distinguished man of letters" when the "people of 'birth and breeding', so-called" came to be classified. I am ashamed to say that I have never read any of his books and probably should not understand them if I had. I do not think of him as a professor but as a man who forgot to be young until his coevals were old and then set himself to make up for lost time. He has a child's capacity for enjoyment and a child's faculty of wonder. New ideas are his playthings; and his imagination will reconstruct

a blank page of history till he seems to be reading from an inspired contemporary document. His the child's habit of make-believe, illuminated by erudition that is quickly becoming inexhaustible. He seems to have taken all knowledge for his province; and, when he finds a gap, he is prompt to fill it. At his first race-meeting he came to me in perplexity: "I understand what a selling-plate is and you have explained the difference between odds-on and odds against. This is *not* a selling-race, but the favourite is starting odds-on. When I was by the rails I heard a man asking his friend whether he proposed to buy the horse. His friend said 'Yes'. 'Then I suppose I must do the same', replied the other. I want you to make this clear to me."

Dear professor! So kindly, so modest; always treating an ignoramus as an equal and projecting the "Why? . . . Why? . . ." of a child when he encountered a new interest! So humble, too, and even at a loss to understand why he had been invited. My heart warmed when he came into the gallery and I saw the twinkling, brown eyes behind the vast, rimless spectacles. One chubby hand was gripping the lapel of his coat; the other was stroking his crisp brown beard and whiskers. Max Beerbohm, after meeting Theodore Watts-Dunton at luncheon, described him affectionately as "very low down over the table, very cosy and hirsute"; I am reminded of the description whenever I think of the shaggy little professor.

He was surrounded almost before he was through the door; we forgot the veiled animosity that had ruled on our journey from London; and we shook hands with him and with his gravely humorous Scotch wife as though we were schoolboys.

"Professor!"

"Professor!"

"Professor Shapland!"

"Mrs. Professor!"

The outburst rather startled Mrs. Reid, who looked as though she took credit for discovering the professor; she rallied quickly, however, and proceeded, as though we were not all of us—with the exception of Miss Arley—already acquainted, to introduce us with a few lines of helpful, if not always accurate, biographical matter:

"Now, Mrs. Shapland, let me just see if you know every one. This is Mrs. Helmsley: Mrs. Shapland. The great Professor Shapland. Mr. Helmsley, the great statesman; you've read his speeches, I expect. *You know him?* But of course! Captain Colyton, who plays the piano *too* enchantingly . . ." She worked conscientiously through us until my turn came: "And Mr. Kingsbury . . ." I was not a "great" anything; and she hesitated in consternation in having no label to affix. "Mr. Kingsbury . . . Mr. Kingsbury, whose poor dear uncle was so nearly killed in that dreadful automobile accident this week."

5 (Acc No 2 1855)

WE were still fidgeting under our descriptions, like cats with unaccustomed ribands round our necks, when Mrs. Reid was called to the telephone. I took the professor by the arm and led him round to see such of the pictures as had overflowed from the saloon into the long gallery. Nateby is not famous for its collection; and the gallery is made over to inferior specimens of the later Spanish school; poor in execution and morbid in concep-

tion. While he passed from unconvincing temptations to unbelievable martyrdoms, I studied the distant group by the east fire-place and marvelled how the genius who designed the gallery had in some way made it independent of changing fashions in dress. Doublets and hose, knee-breeches and stockings had at one time or another warmed themselves by that fire. Where Peter stood smoking a cigarette, some one had stood taking snuff. And the wainscotted walls and stone fire-places, the mullioned windows and groined ceiling fitted us no worse than they had fitted them. They would fit the fashions of a century hence no worse than they fitted us.

"People 'of birth and breeding', so-called."

I wish that the learned judge could have seen that group. I wish I could reproduce it as I saw it then. Already, in what I have written, I must have given an impression I did not intend. I am not describing only what I saw, only what a stranger would have seen; I am using my earlier knowledge of the people I am trying to depict, perhaps casting over them the shadow of what was to come. Let me start again! A very few lines will suffice for what I saw with my physical eyes.

A long gallery with windows at either end and deep embrasures along one side; on the other, two fire-places, a fire burning in the far one and a group of men and women talking round it. The door opens; a man-servant delivers a message; and Mrs. Reid, that pale-haired, shrivelled little woman with the skin-tight green-scaled dress and the monstrous pearls, hurries out. From her accent, as she excuses herself, you may know her for an American from a middle-west state; from her movements and manner, you may judge that she is nervous at all

times and now gravely upset by the way her party is shaping. She is a precisian and a martinet; everything and everybody in her house must go by clock-work.

The grey-haired woman standing a little apart is Mrs. Shapland: a homely creature, not prodigal of words, but observant and humorous. Of the young woman in the black dress with long gauze wings I must be excused saying much, for she is my wife. The dark hair, parted in the middle and coiled tightly over her ears, gives her something of an Italian look, but she is in fact Shropshire born and bred, with a far-away strain of Welsh blood. The man talking to her, good-looking at this distance, is Peter Colyton; only when you notice his restless eyes and sunken cheeks would you realize that he is a sick man.

The slender, exquisite child with the figure of a boy and a boy's hair parted at the side is Jocelyn Arley, the daintiest, most fragrant bud of a girl that I have seen for many years. I do not know her age, but that white dance-frock might well be her first evening-dress, this may well be her first grown-up party. The lips are eagerly parted, the brown eyes are shining as she looks from one face to another, all ready to enjoy herself deliriously, but just a little shy of so many strangers. Guessing this, perhaps, Adela Glynde engages her in conversation. An arresting contrast! Adela is a dozen years older, a mature woman of splendid line and majestic poise, so silent and still that, until she moves, you might think she was a figure of ivory and gold. The face is grave, but not sad; you would be conscious of icy reserve long before you wondered whether anything underlay that frozen manner.

...way that I cannot define, the couple talking and laughing on the settee beyond the fire are faintly different from the rest. Keith Helmsley is more a man of fashion than the rest of us. His tailor has seen to it that the cut of his waistcoat, the braid on his trousers belong to December, nineteen-hundred and twenty-four, and to no other month or year. He is magnificently self-assured and at home everywhere. The gleaming brown eyes and dazzling smile had done destruction, you feel, before he married the languid, voluptuous beauty by his side. Now he is well matched. They are touchingly in love with each other. And she is in some way more modern, more fashionable, infinitely more expensive than the other women. That shingled head and bare back belong of rights to Bone's Club or the Palm Court rather than to a Christmas party in a remote corner of Northumberland. I am sure she is condoning a recent divorce or explaining the new game that is going to supersede cross-word puzzles. There is nothing to stamp her as stupid or underbred.

That, I believe, is the scene that would have caught a stranger's attention: decorative, pleasing, but not otherwise remarkable. And, almost before he could memorize it, the door would have opened and Mrs. Reid would have darted in, explanatory, apologetic and disruptive, urging us in to dinner and counting heads as she shepherded us to the door. Some one is missing! It is the professor. We find him stroking his beard and staring at a macabre death-bed where an expiring roysterer catches his first glimpse of eternal punishment. It is an execrable picture; but something in it has gripped the little professor's interest.

"It never occurred to me before," he is muttering.

"What have you discovered, professor?" I asked.

He started at the question and pointed to the leering devil in the picture above our heads.

"*Why . . . ?*," he began gravely, then broke off to laugh. "You know, that would make rather a good conversational opening at a dinner-party, if it didn't startle your neighbour too much. Probably she would think it was a riddle . . ."

As Mrs. Reid's quick eyes swept the faces of her party I could see her resolving that, as the professor was the only lion to survive, he must provide the sport which she had expected to receive from the absentees. The professor, I could see, would be made to perform until a fresher lion could be secured in his place; and her brisk gestures apprised us that we were to be learned and intelligent at all costs.

"Now what's this wonderful man saying?" she demanded of me. "Some picture nobody knew was there?"

The professor, abashed at finding himself in the middle of the stage, flung his head up and looked about him in dismay.

"Dear me, no! A very ordinary picture on a very trite theme. It suggested a question, though. The conventional representation of the devil. . . . I was about to ask our friend here; but, as a conversational opening, it seemed rather abrupt."

"But what's the question?" Mrs. Reid persisted.

The professor pursued his own line of thought:

"There must be an explanation if one knew where to look for it. Marbury might know. Or Sandeman. I ask them when I get back to Cambridge. It would be interesting to know when that representation occu

first. I should be inclined to give it great antiquity. Indeed, one could construct an hypothesis . . ."

"But what's the question?," Mrs. Reid repeated.

The professor came out of his reverie with a start.

"Oh, didn't I tell you? I'm so sorry," he apologized.

"It's a very simple question: *why has the devil a cloven hoof?*"

"You certainly are the sweetest lamb," said Mrs. Reid, with a little scream of delight.

CHAPTER THREE

THE "POOR, DECENT DEVIL"

I

SINCE I began this narrative, I am conscious of a new respect for the art of the novelist. My training in *précis*-writing and in the drafting of despatches affords me less than no assistance in the business of portraying people whom I know well in such a way as to make them actual or even credible to others. I lack the novelist's insight into what people are thinking; I cannot discriminate with his certainty between the false and the true in what I am told; and I have, until now, never been required to study the architecture, the construction and the embellishment that are, I suppose, the elementals of his craft.

It is, however, in the matter of recording conversations that I feel most at a disadvantage. In my diplomatic career I could report not only the discussion in which three or four men were speaking to their briefs, but also the diffuse and often disconnected conversation of the dinner-table, when it was necessary to discover if any one was trying to force or coax the talk into a certain channel. My diaries of the period are full of these

lengthy transcripts. I am blessed with a retentive memory which has been strengthened by hard exercise. I doubt not that, even after the lapse of many months, I could reproduce most of the conversation which I heard during these days and nights at Nateby, but to include all that was said would make this book as long as life itself. And I have never considered on what principle the novelist makes his selection. I have read somewhere that the purpose of dialogue is to illuminate character or to assist action, but this takes me altogether out of my depth. I must try to recall and to set down the most salient expressions of opinion in an evening when there was no "action", in a writer's sense of that word, and when the conversation, so far as I could see, shed no light on the characters of those who took part in it. I need another justification for recording so fully and faithfully our rambling talk on that first night. I find it in this: that the conversation set our thoughts in a certain channel, that we were sharply divided in opinion and that the business of clearing our minds and of defining our intellectual position was no less important a piece of "action" than, let me say, our conversion from one religion to another. Some one, as we went down to dinner, was asking Miss Arley about "bootlegging" in America. Had we continued to discuss "bootlegging", this *apologia* need never have been written.

2

"HE's coming,!" Mrs. Reid announced triumphantly.
"Lord Escott, I mean. At least I *think* he is. The line was terribly indistinct."

"What happened to him?," asked Enid.

"I don't rightly know. . . . He was telephoning from his home up here, not from London at all. Some one had dropped in on him unexpectedly; and he didn't like to leave him. I said 'Bring him right along.' They're on their way now."

I looked round the table and counted the numbers. Punch and his friend would make us a party of twelve with the sexes balanced. I wondered, not without misgiving, who the friend might be. Others, I fancy, were asking themselves the same question; and, if I reproduced the conversation as it took place instead of compressing it in emulation of the novelist's method, it would run somewhat on these lines:

"Did he say who . . .?"

"Where is Lord Escott's place . . ."

"Our numbers are right now . . ."

"Some of Punch's friends, it's only fair to say . . ."

"I've heard so much of Lord Escott that I'm crazy to meet him . . ."

"He's a wicked man, my dear!"

"Did any of you hear about Punch at the time of the armistice?"

"I never take soup, thanks."

"I met him in Paris the day after the armistice was signed . . ."

"What is it? Sherry?"

In time Mrs. Reid's voice rose triumphant over the rest:

"I didn't hear whether he said 'Mr. Stranger' or 'a stranger to you.' The line was just wicked. Do any of you know anybody called Stranger? As far as I could get him, Lord Escott seemed to think we should. A

lame man, he said (I'd just told them both to bring their golf things). Very shy. He wasn't at all sure he could get him to come, but I said he must. *We'd* very soon shew him whether he was welcome or not, I said. No need for any one to be shy with *me*, I should think."

As I could not remember having met any friend of Punch's named Stranger, I retired from the general conversation and addressed myself to Adela. We talked of books and plays, of her illness and of the doctors she had consulted, of old days in Northumberland, of London before the war and after it. We talked of the war and of our last meeting under that roof, when we realized, one after another, that the incredible was about to happen. We discussed whether war could have been avoided and whether any one had benefited by it. We debated the chances of another war in our lifetime and considered the new grouping of power since the treaty of Versailles. I do not recall that we said anything very new or illuminating, but we traversed a wide field. I gave Adela abundant openings and found, after each one, that I was conducting a monologue. She listened; she nodded or shook her head in the right places; but she was utterly uninterested.

Then I tried her with a question about her own work. She told me that she believed she was doing good, that all of it was distressing and some of it heart-breaking, but that she could not very well discuss it with a man. Confronted with another wall of silence, I asked her about the friends of our youth, only to be told that she saw nobody nowadays.

"It was mere curiosity that brought me here," she added.

"To see Nateby under the present rule?"

"Not quite. To see it without a Dennison. It's never happened before. When I heard that Harry had been killed, I wondered what had been left behind."

"What had been left?," I echoed.

Adela waited until we were screened by the conversation of our neighbours:

"Well, for hundreds of years you've had people here struggling in a certain direction. They were fighting to maintain themselves and to increase their power and to preserve order. They were fighting to develop England along certain lines and to achieve a certain kind of culture. They fought for a certain religion. There was a spirit handed down from one generation to another and fed with enormous energy and stubbornness. Did that all come to an end when Harry was killed? Can a disembodied will linger on? I wanted to see."

"And what have you seen?"

"I don't know. I went into the chapel before dinner. It was rather frightening. I felt that God had been there once; I wondered whether God remained when the house was abandoned. If not . . ."

She did not finish her sentence; and I did not press her. If we could trace the religious history of Nateby, we should probably find that the inhabitants had at one time worshipped gods of wood and stone. At another, the Romans had brought their gods with them. At another, again, shrines had been built for the new god whose cult spread west and north from the shores of Galilee. When Rome withdrew her legions, new gods were imported from Scandinavia. What had happened to the old? The chapel which Adela had found deserted stood near the site of a temple where sacrifices had been offered to Jupiter. Did these gods withdraw when their

worshippers disappeared? Did they brood over the shrines where once they had been worshipped?

As we fell silent, the voices round us swelled insistently, drowning speculation. Mrs. Reid was explaining her conception of an "old-fashioned English Christmas"; and the others were contributing unsolicited suggestions. Already, I learned, the justice-room had been given over to a gigantic tree; boughs of holly, I observed, were draping the walls and stairs; mistletoe hung invitingly over the doors. Suspicious of local talent, our hostess was importing a choir of carol-singers from Newcastle and a team of bell-ringers from somewhere else. We were denied or spared waits for fear of their conflicting with the military band which she had engaged to play at meals and with the syncopated orchestra that was arriving for the ball. It was the first time that I had heard of a ball; and Miss Arley echoed the word with rapture. Mrs. Reid repeated that there was to be a small dance on one night, a ballet on another, a dramatic performance of some kind after that and an all-night revel to see the new year in. At some point, I fancy, tea and carols were being supplied to the tenants. For the benefit of Nateby village, an ox was to be roasted whole on Christmas day. Turkeys and geese had been fattened for us; Christmas puddings and mince pies, mixed by the Dennison recipes, were being distributed to the outdoor staff; and bread, meat and ale, in accordance with the custom of the house, were in readiness for any one that asked for them.

"And the wassail?," enquired Peter Colyton stonily. "You can't keep Christmas properly without wassail."

"I'll call up Fortnum's in the morning," Mrs. Reid promised hurriedly, before Miss Arley could ask her

what wassail was. "And the yule-log . . . I'm just crazy about these old English customs. Oh, my *dear*," she continued to her young compatriot. "I'll give you something to tell them about when you're back home. But you be careful about standing around under the mistletoe!" She looked provocatively at the men in turn, as though she expected to spend the next week fleeing from one pursuer to another. "No good protesting if you're caught. It's the gentlemen's privilege. So if you want to be able to say you've never been kissed by any one but your husband . . ."

Finding Mrs. Reid's pleasantries a little heavy, I turned once more to Adela. It was clear to me that our hostess belonged to the numerous class of women who live under the delusion that every man they meet is in love with them. Such women are to be felicitated: their faith gives them strength without storing up disappointments. It is the men, credited with a passion they do not feel, who are to be pitied. I took Mr. Irwin T. Reid for granted: America was handicapped by a marked deficiency of women to men in the days when he married. That other men had laid their hearts at Mrs. Reid's feet I refused to believe. She was too self-centred, too much absorbed in her quarter-comprehended creeds and cures; she would insist on talking about herself when her lovers wanted to talk about themselves.

"What was the origin of kissing under the mistletoe?" I asked Adela.

"You'd better try the professor," she recommended. "He knows everything. What an orgy this week's going to be! It's curious that, to the majority of people in this country, Christmas only means a recognized opportunity for eating and drinking too much!"

"You must blame the early Christians who grafted the birth-feast of Christ on to the old Saturnalia," I said.

"Or the later Christians who kept the Saturnalia and rejected the birth-feast? Shall we trouble ourselves about the Christian ideal this week? We shall be too bloated."

At the risk of engaging in religious controversy, I answered that I thought Christian ethics, which most men would still honour, had been threatened by too close an association with Christian dogmas in which hardly any one believed literally. The sermon on the mount, which had changed the moral outlook of the world, was sacrificed to the immaculate conception, which had changed nothing. No church accorded the name of Christian to a moralist unless he could mumble a creed; and theologians had wrangled so long over the nature of Christ that they had no time to spare for Christ's teaching.

"You have an example before you here," I ventured. "The carol-singers will shortly be telling us that Christ was born of a virgin, which was a doctrine invented later to gratify a passion for obscure prophecies and has no bearing on the value of Christian teaching. I don't believe it; probably you don't either. And fewer people are believing it every day that takes us farther from the very credulous and ignorant historians who recorded every kind of offence against the laws of nature. Whether we believe it or not, though, makes no difference to the feeling, which you and I probably share, that the Christian deal is the highest that has come into the world."

"It makes a difference to people who only follow the Christian ideal because they're offered Heaven as a reward

and Hell as a punishment. If you strip Christianity of its divine sanction, will people embrace it for its own sake?"

"Did they embrace it truly," I asked, "when they believed in the existence of Heaven and Hell as firmly as we believe in the existence of France and Italy? In the so-called 'ages of faith', I doubt if Christ would have recognized the life led in his name. A Christian, to my thinking, is one who strives to emulate the spirit of Christ and to obey his precepts; and I believe Christ would be the first to rebuke the utter childishness of the great controversies about his attributes which have rent the world in every age of the Christian era. What does it matter whether something is of identical substance or like substance? What does it matter if a spirit proceeds from father *and* son or from one only? The thing of value in Christianity is that it introduced for the first time the idea of forbearance, mercy and love into a world of rigid observances, iron contracts, and fierce retaliations. The churches have said, though, that, if you want to be called a Christian, you must believe things that the human intelligence now refuses to believe. More and more people are saying: 'I won't be a Christian on those terms.' The teaching is thrown overboard with the dogma."

3

OUR conversation was taking too intimate a turn for the liking of our hostess, who ordained that, if I had a sermon to preach, I must preach it to all.

"Teaching? Dogma?," she echoed. "We want to hear what this wonderful man's saying!"

"We were only talking about Christmas and the Saturnalia," I said. "Professor, what's the origin of kissing under the mistletoe? Was that part of the Saturnalia?"

The professor roused from the reverie in which, I suddenly realized, he had been sunk since the beginning of dinner.

"Mistletoe?," he repeated dreamily. "Frazer tells you all about that. The *Golden Bough*, you know." His face suddenly lightened. "Frazer! *He'd* know! I'll send him a line." He leant across to his wife. "My dear, remind me to send a line to Sir James Frazer. A very interesting question . . ."

With the celerity of long practice, acquired in acting as memory for the most forgetful and helpless husband that ever strayed outside the pages of a novel, Mrs. Shapland produced a note-book and pencil.

"About mistletoe?," she asked.

"No, no! Who's talking about mistletoe? I want to know why the devil has a cloven hoof."

It was impossible not to laugh. While we were eating and talking, the professor had been frowning at the candle in front of him and ignoring the plates that were set down and taken away at short intervals. My wife and Nora Helmsley, after one attempt to engage him in conversation, had left him to his thoughts. The rest of us, I believe, had almost forgotten his presence. When my question aroused him, he attacked his food with the guilty speed of a child caught red-handed in disobedience. And, when he explained his preoccupation, the seriousness of his tone was irresistibly comical. He spoke as Galileo in early childhood might have spoken, demanding to know why the earth revolved round the sun; but he

contrived to make a personal matter of it, as though he suspected that one of us had meanly stolen the devil's foot and substituted a hoof.

"I suppose somebody has explained it all, though I've not met the explanation," he continued. "It's not my subject."

"You said you could construct an hypothesis," Keith reminded him.

"It was just an idea that occurred to me when I was looking at that picture. I've been trying to think whether I've met it anywhere before . . ."

Instantly, though the poor professor had hardly begun his dinner, Mrs. Reid insisted that we must all be let into his secret. This wonderful man, she explained as though he had not been present, was going to write another of his marvellous books; it would be dated from Nateby and dedicated to "my friend Henrietta Reid"; and, as we should all have to buy any book he wrote, why would he not take pity on us and give us just an outline now? She vowed that none of us would breathe a word about it.

"But there's really nothing . . .," the professor began in obvious distress. "I shouldn't dream of committing it to print. It's not my subject. I was just wondering. . . . The cloven hoof, the horns, the tail: why should the devil be represented in that way? He might have been given three heads, like Cerberus, or a hundred hands, like Briareus. He—or, perhaps I should say, the spirit of evil—*was* depicted as a serpent. And you can see the reason for that," he continued dreamily: "the serpent is silent, insidious, therefore cunning and probably malicious; he is immensely strong and very long-lived; he casts his skin and is therefore immortal;

he crawls on his belly and is therefore expiating some colossal crime, like that of compassing the fall of man. . . . It's easy to understand why *he* should be made the symbol of undying evil, but why this other representation? Why this devil of the middle ages? Why the cloven hoof?"

While the professor, avoiding his wife's eye, addressed himself to his neglected dinner, we took up his question and debated it among ourselves. I am afraid "the cloven hoof" was one of a thousand phrases that I used habitually without the mental curiosity to enquire into its origin. Akin with it was the colloquial phrase "a hairy heel". Were these to be associated with another phrase, "the mark of the beast"? This would be helpful if we were content to stigmatize the devil as something bestial, lower than man; the explanation hardly applied to a fallen angel, the undefeated antagonist of God.

"The cloven hoof," muttered Mrs. Reid with a conscientious frown.

Some one—I think it was Keith—propounded that primitive peoples delighted in imagining monstrosities.

"You have the hydra, the gorgon. You have Polyphemus, with his one eye in the middle of his forehead."

Some one—I think it was little Miss Arley—added that the cloven hoof in conjunction with a human body was at least as old as the satyrs. Some one else contributed the woman with the fish's tail and the man with the horse's body. Mrs. Reid smiled her approval on our efforts to be suitably learned. I described a manatee which I had once seen in South America. Travelling the same road as Keith, but from a different starting-place, Peter Colyton advanced a theory, based on early fables,

that to the primitive intelligence the distinction between man and the other animals was ill-defined:

"They didn't consciously invent monstrosities. They believed in them and didn't regard them as monstrosities."

The professor beamed encouragingly and led us back to the satyrs.

"Anything more?" he asked.

"Well, they had tails too, didn't they?," asked Enid.

"And horns," contributed Keith.

The professor's nods and smiles, charmingly reminiscent of a benevolent schoolmaster, drew us in, one after another, to play his game with him.

"In fact," Peter summed up, "if you took that picture in the gallery and cut out the devil, you could use him again, in a forest setting, for 'The Pipes of Pan' or 'Sunset in Arcady'. In all outward respects, Pan is identical with the devil, but that doesn't take us any further."

"You think not?" asked the professor.

"Pan was never the spirit of *evil*: he was rather the personification of wild nature."

"I agree! It's the old question in a different dress. When evil came to be given a shape, why was Pan's shape chosen? My old question: why was the devil given his cloven hoof?"

While we waited for him to continue, Mrs. Reid gave a whispered order for the wine to be put on the table and our plates left where they were. The big sconces along the walls were extinguished; and we found ourselves listening by the light of shaded candles. I wish I could reproduce the professor's speech! His phrases linger in my memory, but I cannot commit to paper the conviction and the drama in his presentation. By now he was

sitting so far back that his face was in shadow; and we listened to a gently compelling voice that sank and gathered speed as he was carried away by his own eloquence. By looking up at the darkness of the vaulted roof I could forget our modern clothes and furnishings; I could forget that I was in a house and imagine myself to be roaming the moorland over which we had driven three hours before. Time, like a lifting mist, wavered and disappeared; and I was back in an age of goat-skin aprons and human sacrifice.

"I suppose the devil is a relatively new conception," began the professor; "he is the creation of Christianity, which is among the most recent of the world's worships. You must picture the world as the new religion spread over it. Not Rome or Athens or Byzantium or Galilee—they were the London, the Paris, the York, the Whitby of those days—, but the remote country places of Thessaly—the Welsh-mountain villages of our own time—, where human beliefs had remained without change for uncounted generations: the highways and hedges into which the apostles of the new faith were sent to make proselytes. Before Christ could be accepted, what was the antagonist to be overcome? Not a clearly defined pagan god. The popular festivals of paganism were adapted to Christian use; the gods and goddesses were converted into saints; their temples were consecrated as churches. But the soul of the pagan world was still active; it was kept alive in half-forgotten rites; it appealed to instincts old as time itself. Whenever it roused, the old battle between paganism and Christianity had to be fought anew; and paganism was older, paganism was at least equally strong. To the first missionaries, paganism must have defined itself as the arch-enemy:

when they had wrestled with Mithras and Osiris, with Zeus and Aphrodite—the sophisticated gods of cultured peoples—, they had to wrestle with something older and stronger still, the spirit of wild nature, which simple folk had personified as Pan. He was the oldest god. When they were bidden to worship a Christ whom they had never seen—in those days, even, an emaciated, tortured, dying Christ—, these simple folk must have found far more real the Pan by whom on mild nights in spring they had all of them been possessed. A Pan whose pipes they heard, whatever a scoffing preacher might say of wind soughing in the tree-tops. A Pan whom they had glimpsed, surely, at twilight in the undergrowth, however much the preacher said it was a goat or a boy. Could they give him up if they so desired? He was a part of them, the god of their own wild nature.”

As the professor paused, I fancied I could hear a faint sigh.

“No compromise in that war!” he continued. “No saint’s halo for a Pan artfully made respectable. The two could not coexist. Wild nature, everywhere the enemy of Christ, was made the enemy of all who were being won to Christ’s side. He became the embodiment and symbol of evil. And, when primitive art tried to represent Satanas, the tempter whom Christ had resisted but who lingered on to try the strength of Christ’s followers, he was painted under a guise that all knew. Wild nature. Pan. The tempter who put carnal thoughts in the hearts of men who had been told that to lust after a woman was to commit adultery with her. So Satanas was given Pan’s tail and horns, his cloven hoof . . .”

4

"THAT'S the theory that occurred to me," the professor ended diffidently.

"Ingenious," muttered Peter.

"You're not convinced?"

"I'm open to conviction, but you've made the transition too easy. The sophisticated gods weren't given up without a struggle. Their fall was broken for them; they were made demigods, saints. When you come to a god who runs in the blood of his people, so to say, it's no mean thing to get him repudiated and dethroned."

"It would never have happened in a straight fight," said the professor. "Pan was betrayed by his own followers, by those who yearned for a different ideal. Christ and Pan. You may express the conflict between them as a conflict between asceticism and nature. Pan was defeated when those who professed to worship nature sold him to gratify their obscure craving for something different from nature. It was one of the greatest conflicts in history: the oldest god fighting for his life on the oldest battle-field, the meeting-place of religion and morals. If you let your imagination play over it . . ."

He paused with an apologetic murmur that he had talked too much. At once he was assailed by a chorus of "Go on!" Flushing with gratification, he looked across for the permission of his wife, who habitually told him when he must "get on with his dinner" and reminded him that he must not drink whiskey-and-soda after champagne.

"You're all encouraging him to talk a great deal," sighed Mrs. Shapland.

"It doesn't do him any harm and it's ever so good for us," said Enid.

"But I don't know what you want me to say!", cried the professor.

"The battle between Christ and Pan," Peter reminded him.

The professor leaned back with one knee thrown over the other and the tips of his fingers pressed together.

"It's not my subject," he complained, "but I suppose that, all over the world, religion has its roots in magical and devotional attempts to influence the course of nature. Nature; phusis; the growth-process; the means of life. Morals appear first as restrictions on the liberty of a man when that liberty threatens to injure the tribal security or to anger the tribal god. For the rest, I take it, primitive man followed the behests of his own nature, eating when he was hungry and drinking when he was thirsty, sleeping when he was tired and seizing a woman when he fancied. What we regard as abnormal or perverted passed as a matter of course: if it was natural for you to behave in that way, it could not be wrong. The age of wild nature, if not the golden age, with Pan as the universal god. Before good and evil spread from the sophisticated faiths."

As the professor paused again, some one asked him whether good and evil had not always existed.

"I must leave that to the theologians," he answered. "A *belief* in good and evil, as contending forces, begins to appear, sooner or later, in every religion; these forces are related to good and evil forces in the individual, ever at war; commonly they become a conflict between soul and body, spirit and flesh. And in that place

asceticism is born. Pan was still ruling when John Baptist lived in the wilderness on locusts and wild honey. And Jesus fasted forty days and forty nights to achieve mastery over himself. It was Pan, not Julian, who should have said '*Vicisti, Galilae . . .*'"

"Nature and asceticism," murmured Mrs. Reid, with an air of originality.

"It was during those forty days that judgement was pronounced against Pan," the professor expounded. "Christ was not himself an ascetic: he was abused for gluttony and wine-bibbing; but those who came after him believed that the shortest way to the higher life which he preached was by mortifying the flesh till it lay dead to Pan's enticements. So early as Paul the delights of the senses are being circumscribed: you are permitted to marry because of the weakness of the flesh and because it is better to marry than to burn. Those who followed Paul fasted and mutilated themselves; they lived erect on pillars or bent double in caves. They made asceticism an end in itself instead of a means to the life which Christ had preached as something nobler than wild nature. One sometimes doubts whether Christ, at any time in the last nineteen hundred years, would have recognized the faith called Christianity."

As though fearful of wounding the susceptibilities of his hearers, the professor took up again the persuasive manner in which he had described his simple pagans before the first missionaries went forth:

"And so Pan was first thrown from his eminence and then hunted out of sight. Christianity became the rule for those who found that nature was not good enough for them; it became a rule in which nature was denounced as the enemy of Christ. You want to know how?" he

asked Peter. "You think I make the transition too easy? It was so little easy that the gossellers must often have despaired. Long and bitter the fight must have been; and it is not yet over. Imagine!" A deeper silence fell on the room as the professor declaimed how the first missionaries set about their work. "A gaunt figure, travel-stained and unkempt, begging his bread and drinking water from wayside streams. Weary, half-famished, with bleeding hands and broken feet. No staff or scrip. His coat in rags. Kept alive by the fury of his own faith. A stranger in a strange land, following in the steps of Paul and thundering that the soul cannot be saved until the body has been subdued, that punishment eternal is the lot of those who reject the chance of salvation. At first he has everything his own way. Have you ever seen a revivalist meeting in the Welsh mountains? Imagine some tiny village set down in Thessaly or Epirus, under the shadow of great mountains, with olive-green woods—alive and rustling with wild nature—stealing up to the cottage-doors. Imagine the passion of that voice, the force of that wasted figure. You can picture the scared faces, the frightened protestations, the eager rush to be baptized! . . . The gaunt preacher smiles grimly and departs to the next village. Alas, what is happening on his return? The grapes have been gathered, his young men and maidens are drunk. Christ is forgotten, Pan has possessed himself of his people. They are feasting and singing! The men, like lustful satyrs, are stealing upon the women to ravish them. Wild nature, for the moment, is good enough for them; they mock the higher life. . . . The preacher exhorts and threatens; but, when he talks of sin, they mock him. How can nature be sinful? At length he sees a light:

nature is sin, sin nature; that is all. And their god of wild nature is the incarnation of evil. Whenever they see a cloven hoof or a tail and horns, they are in the presence of the tempter. Satanias . . . is Pan, Pan Satanias. This time the preacher departs in a mood of something like confidence. So Paul himself might have driven the lesson home, as he drove home that other lesson on the unknown god: '*Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.*' . . . And so the devil got Pan's hoof. Or such is my theory. I have no knowledge. The idea occurred to me. I warned you it was not my subject. My university, I should say, pays me to lecture on moral philosophy." . . .

5

A LONG silence followed ; and, when the butler came in with the cigars, I think we most of us felt grateful for the interruption. Though we might have debated the professor's thesis half the night, it would have been fatally easy to achieve an anticlimax.

Before closing my account of this dinner, I must think whether I am leaving out anything of importance. Only too well am I aware of my limitations in creating a life-like debate from something that was not a discussion, not quite a monologue, certainly not a conversation. I can vouch for the accuracy of my passages with Adela; and, if I have only given small space to Peter, this is not because he was not talking brilliantly, but because so much of what he said was tangential. The professor tossed an idea into the air, Peter juggled with it daz- zlingly, but in the end he tossed it back. The women hardly spoke at all. Yes, I believe that, in so far as I

could hear four or five conversations merging in one debate, I have done justice to the speakers.

On any other occasion the professor's dramatic fantasies would have seemed grotesquely out of place at a dinner-table; but Mrs. Reid's method of stage-managing a party had reconciled me to seeing one of her guests turned on, like a gramophone, to bridge the gaps in conversation. Was I not myself instrumental in winding the handle and changing the records? And, however little I have succeeded in reproducing the professor's histrionic manner, I can call the testimony of all who heard him that it was superb. I for one should hardly have been surprised if the butler, after giving me my coffee, had murmured that a strange new preacher had arrived in the village and was holding his audience spell-bound on the green.

I have said that this conversation was of importance in turning our thoughts into a certain channel. During the silence that followed I suspect that we were all thinking of that last conflict between nature and asceticism; and the first words spoken expressed a vague wish that we could all "go back to nature."

It was Nora Helmsley who expressed the wish; and, before she could elaborate it, her watchful husband had snatched her back from the mire of platitudinous irrelevancy in which she seemed predestined to wallow.

"If only we could!" he sighed. "I'm all for Pan. And I'm sorry for the beggar. It seems rough on him. He was a poor, decent god; and this accursed *odium theologicum* has fixed on him all the most detestable attributes that fanatics for two thousand years have been able to imagine."

I heard a grunt from Peter and observed him to be filling a claret-glass with brandy. His face was flushed, his eye wandering. When the change began I have no idea; he had held his own with the professor and had not seemed to be drinking more than usual; now his speech and manner betrayed him to the least suspicious.

"Don't agree," he began abruptly. "Don't agree old Keith bit. *I* think it's rough Satan. He'd been poor, decent devil if he'd been lef' 'lone, but when he's saddled with all . . . all . . . all the bestiality man can commit in a state of wild nature. . . ."

He gulped his brandy and looked round the table. I began to wonder whether he was in fact drunk; and, when he spoke again, I knew he was not.

"Wild nature. . . . If you've ever seen anything of wild nature . . . I suppose you may say we reverted to nature in the war . . ."

Mrs. Reid looked hurriedly round the table and stood up:

"See, listen, I make you responsible for him," she whispered to me. "Don't go give him anything more to drink."

CHAPTER FOUR

A VOTE OF CONFIDENCE

I

ONE more challenge to Sir Lawrence Warburton—and that a short one—then I hope to finish this statement without referring to him again.

In the course of the trial he used the phrase “mad or drunk or both” so often that some people, in the belief that whatever is said three times must be true, may have taken his words at their face-value. It may therefore be not superfluous to put on record that, during the six days we all spent at Nateby, though Punch Escott is habitually saturated with alcohol, no one shewed the slightest sign of intoxication on any occasion, with the exception of Peter Colyton on the first night. I wish some one had: it is true to say that those who behaved most strangely were those who drank least.

I admit that Peter’s manner after this first dinner would have aroused suspicion in any one who did not know him; as I knew him, I hasten to withdraw the slight admission I have already made. Peter was not drunk, but for a moment he had lost control of himself as completely as if he had been suffering from epilepsy.

I had seen a similar display once before, when he struck a meditative chord on the piano, looked about him and then jumped up as though he had seen a ghost. Then it was he told me that, though music was his one mode of expression, what he had to express was unfit for human ears. The attack, then and now, was over in a moment. We had steered wide of the war, knowing it to be a dangerous subject, but this talk of "wild nature" had set Peter's mind working, as he admitted, on the strange ways in which he had seen human nature behaving when it reverted to a wild form in the war.

The scene, indescribably painful while it lasted, was over almost before the women were out of the room. After a muttered apology, Peter hastened to compliment the professor on his contribution to demonology. They quoted Theocritus at each other and compared notes on their travels in Greece.

No, Peter was not drunk that night. No one was drunk, in the accepted sense of the term, though I am not sure a good many of us were not intoxicated by the idea of liberty which the professor had suggested in describing the last stand of nature against the invading god of asceticism.

2

THE women were still discussing it, when we came into the hall, "the lovely, tranquil world where every one was perfectly natural and nobody had a conscience," as Mrs. Reid termed it.

The professor smiled to himself as he surveyed the miracle of expensive artifice, fidgeting on a sofa and drawling praise of nature.

"I doubt if it was lovely," he objected, "and I'm sure it was anything but tranquil."

"Oh, but it must have been!" she cried, tucking up her feet to make room for him. "No right or wrong! That's always my stumbling-block, everybody's! Mrs. Helmsley and I are off to Arcady by the first boat. Miss Arley's coming, too. I'm not sure about Mrs. Kingsbury. . . ."

"I shall stay here, on the side of the angels," said Enid. "You see, I believe right and wrong have existed since the world began."

As she walked to the piano, I joined the group by the fire and judged the sincerity of my hostess's devotion to nature by her independence of it in the equipment of her house. The unsophisticated Arcadian, I felt, would have been bewildered by a room in which there were card-tables at one end, a loud-speaker at the other and a space cleared for dancing between. A long table under one window groaned beneath the weight of all its new novels. There were enough cigarettes, chocolates and illustrated papers for a party ten times the size. Evidently the hall was to be our rallying-point; and, like every other part of the house, it was provisioned against a siege. It failed entirely to suggest simple living.

As I concluded my brief inspection, I found Mrs. Reid's eye upon me.

"You want something?" she enquired. "You sweet things, let me say right now that, if you want anything, you've only to ring the bell or telephone down. I've had telephones put in every room . . . What are you laughing at, you provoking man?"

"I was comparing this with my rather hazy conception of Arcady," I answered. "I was wondering how you'd like the change."

By the unexpected flash from her pale eyes, I judged that this shrunken little autocrat was not used to being teased. Then, as she looked restlessly about her to make sure that her guests and servants were all functioning in accordance with plan, I wondered whether she was bending under the strain of a life for which she was so woefully unfitted.

"But I'm crazy about nature! The freedom! The simplicity! . . . Why, back home . . ." Whatever her manner of worshipping nature on the rolling wheat-land of the middle west, she decided not to divulge it. And I was strengthened in my suspicion that, for the moment at least, she was pining to escape. Perhaps she feared that she had said too much: I saw her struggling to recover the earlier note of badinage. "You must come with us, Mr. Kingsbury, and you must bring that sweet little wife of yours with you."

"Civilization's good enough for me," I answered, pulling a chair into the circle. "I have never believed in the reality of shepherd-boys singing to oaten pipes in flawless elegiacs. The nearer you get to nature," I maintained without exploring the field of morals and religion, "the less freedom, the less simplicity you'll find. All your time will be taken up in keeping alive."

Nature! I imagine that natural man, by which I mean a creature not yet embarrassed by the ethics of organized communal life, must have spent a big part of his time grubbing or hunting for food and another big part fashioning a shelter to eat it in, while the whole time, night and day, summer and winter, he carried his

life in his hand. His dark mind must have been shattered by terror at every storm or rainbow, every cry of a beast and every footstep of a man. He lived horribly; but, as the heaven that looked down on his obscure suffering knows, he must have died even more horribly.

"I don't know that I should like *that*," said Nora Helmsley, smoothing newly shingled hair with an ornately manicured hand. "I just want to live naturally. I always say, I wonder if we shouldn't be *happier* without all these telephones and motor-cars. Of course I know they're very wonderful. Wireless. All that."

"Don't you ever want to follow your natural impulses?" Keith asked me.

Under his suave smile, I felt that his natural impulse at that moment was to stuff a handkerchief into his wife's lovely mouth.

I shook my head and settled more comfortably into my chair. What would it mean to follow my natural impulses? First of all, I supposed, came the impulse to secure food and warmth, already supplied me. I should be free to wreak private vengeance on any one weaker or less alert than myself, at the compensating risk of being slaughtered by any one stronger or more alert than myself. I could resolve any sexual complexes from which I might happen to be suffering. I might wear more sensible clothes or none at all. And I should be liberated from the artificialities of civilization. In front of a hot fire, at the end of a good dinner, with a comfortable bed in prospect, I could see nothing but loss on the exchange. My collar, it is true, was chafing me; and I could not take it off. I was constrained to keep my

temper with Mrs. Reid. In other respects, civilization asked nothing of me.

"I wonder!," I said. "It sounds delightful to pick a handful of berries when you're hungry and to drink at a stream when you're thirsty, but in a state of nature, if you, Miss Arley, an unprotected female, took the berries I wanted, I shouldn't hesitate to brain you."

"Oh, say, you wouldn't have the heart!," she pleaded. "I should be wearing a cunning little leopard-skin and a garland of flowers; and my hair would be floating in the wind. You'd find me terribly hard to resist."

"That would make it all the worse," I said. "Other people would find you just as hard to resist; and then we should fight for you like stags."

"And the best man would win, I hope," said Miss Arley, with an inviting toss of her head.

"I was trained for diplomacy," I said, "which—on the rare occasions when it is successful—may be defined as the art of avoiding war."

"Then you'd have no difficulty in outwitting simple, fighting cave-men. Oh, you're not approaching it in the right spirit!"

I must be scrupulously accurate. When I said that some of us were perhaps intoxicated by a new idea, this was not my feeling at the time. I only thought that Mrs. Reid and Jocelyn Arley, with occasional support from Nora, were shewing unusual vivacity in discussing the conditions of life in a state of nature. If I was right in thinking that Mrs. Reid looked tired, I was justified in thinking that she really yearned for a less artificial life. For Jocelyn, with the world before her, it would have been the absurdest affectation to hanker

after berries and a leopard-skin. Nora's opinion was not worth having, one way or the other.

Or so I thought then. As I am striving to be accurate at all costs, I must confess that I never looked upon this restrained, conventional company as so many victims of fierce secret yearnings. I had put the question to myself: what should I do if I were given leave to follow my natural impulses. I had answered it by saying that, in general, I should do nothing. I then assumed that every one must feel as I felt.

At the time I found nothing strange in the persistence with which these women—and, later, some of the men—worried at a subject that, for me, had long since lost its marrow. Freedom! They might have been slaves from the way they repeated the word. I asked them what possible addition they desired to their present freedom. Mrs. Reid replied vaguely that she wanted freedom to be herself; Jocelyn, blushing vividly, said that one could not answer a question like that in a few words; and Nora, evidently deciding not to confine her words to a few, complained that in the life we all led no one was free to eat or dress or think or speak as he liked, not because the conventional method was better but because it was more conventional.

Poor Nora! Her spirit was still tender where Keith had scraped away the solecisms.

We were interrupted by Adela, who called us up into one of the window-embrasures to see the moon rising. From this side of the castle we could just distinguish the solitary humps of the Wall, but the buildings of the home-farm were screened by a belt of trees. There was, indeed, no sign of human habitation and no other trace that the foot of man had ever pressed on this soil since

the floes of the great ice-age melted. Stretching north beyond the farthest reach of sight, the hump-backed moor, glistening or sooty, seemed to fade into a bank of shadow and then to link itself with the arched sky. Though the night was clear enough for the stars to shew, the usual mist spread like a veil of silver gauze over the landscape; as usual, a fine rain was falling.

"If you want nature . . .," said Adela with a little throb of excitement in her voice.

"It looks pretty well untouched," I said.

For nearly four hundred years, I reflected with a cast-back to the games of my boyhood, the legionaries on the Wall had looked out under the same moon on the same drenched waste of misty moorland. The moorland had been shrouded by the same mist and drenched by the same rain for as many centuries before the coming of the Romans as the land had borne its present shape and place.

"The professor ought to see this," Adela continued, allowing a touch of poetry to temper the austerity of her usual mood. "It's quite easy to imagine in this setting. The purely natural life, without care, without shame. Every one eating or sleeping; and suddenly the note of pipes from that wood! Pan runs out. Every one joins hands and dances. If I lived here long, I should come to believe in Pan. . . . Enid's not going to stop, is she?"

I looked down, but my wife had only paused to take off her rings.

"You too yearning to be free, Adela?," I asked.

She smiled with unexpected tolerance:

"I have the desire, but I don't think I have the courage. Remember I'm a clergyman's daughter! And remember

I spend all my time working among people who have aimed at freedom and misfired. As the world's constituted, I don't think we can hope for any more freedom. If I plucked up courage to seek it, mine would be the courage of desperation."

"Desperation? A word I always dislike, Adela."

"Then I won't use it!," she laughed. "What were we talking about? Oh, the beauty of the pagan world! It had a very definite beauty. So has Christianity. You say I've become inhuman, Frank, because I hold that people should decide whether they're going to be pagans or ascetics, but that was the point that the professor put into the mouth of his apostle. Christianity got a hearing because the old life was somehow not good enough; when the choice was between Pan and Christ, it was a choice between living like the beasts and the strenuous, uncompromising business of making and saving your soul. You can't blend the two. And that's what people are doing now." . . .

"You believe," I asked, "in the independent existence of good and evil? You don't believe that we've brought them into existence by creating a sin-sense?"

Adela hesitated before answering and looked out over the rain-swept moor. Her blue eyes were reflective; the gold of her hair flashed as she bent forward.

"Some people would say God implanted the sin-sense in us to raise man above the beasts," she answered. "I don't know. However it came, it's *there*. As the professor told you, in every religion you find this yearning after something better. If I hadn't that, I should kneel down and pray to Pan this minute. I've tried to keep my sin-sense vigilant, but it hasn't made me happy, I don't know that it's done me any good, I'm not even

sure that it's what God intended. For once in a way I almost agree with Nora. If we could put our consciences under an anæsthetic . . . In heaven's name, why is Enid playing that?"

I was so much interested in hearing such doubts from such a woman as Adela that I had paid scant attention to Enid. I realized now that she was playing the Fire Music.

"Don't you care about Wagner?," I asked.

"Oh, it's not that. Turn round!"

I faced the window, as I was bidden, and understood at once why Adela had given her startled exclamation and why she now insisted that I should look out again on the scudding cloud-fleeces and moon-lit moor. The *Valkyrie*, I suppose, is a pagan conception; but the sublimity of the Fire Music links man to eternity and makes him feel immortal. I knew, without being told, what Adela was thinking. When you have loved a woman as I once loved her, you can bound the stairs of conversation, five at a time. We had been thinking of that barren, unchanging moorland as a corner of Pan's realm when he was lord of the earth in the old world, where nature ruled. We were not yet agreed whether the world became a better place when nature was cast down and man set himself to find his soul. I at least—and surely my companion too—had been wondering how the old god yielded to the new, how paganism gasped and died under the tramping feet of Christianity militant. The music supplied the answer. At that moment I had a vision of apostles and saints and martyrs sweeping irresistibly over the face of the world; I knew how Constantine had come to see a cross flaming in the sky; and I understood the faith of any who heard celestial voices.

In wave upon wave the music poured into the night till I fancied it was beating on the bank of shadow where sky and moorland met. At the end the others applauded, but Adela and I stood silent. After a pause, Enid began to play again; and the spell was broken.

"Dramatic," laughed Adela; and I knew we had been thinking alike.

"It was tremendous," I said.

I saw that she was trembling and wondered what kind of drama such music at such a time suggested. As the last wave spent itself, I felt that the new faith had sunk, exhausted but triumphant, on the world which it was to hold in a ring of fire till the second advent. To me, the drama lay in Enid's playing that music in answer to a question which I was still trying to frame. Was Adela trembling at the recollection of what she had said? "*If we could put our consciences under an anæsthetic . . .*"

"What were we talking about?," she asked, with affected lightness. This happened to be the second time, since I joined her by the window, that she had used this phrase. Adela was not normally given to mannerisms, nor prone to inattention. "Oh, the choice every one had to make. The choice every one has to make *still*. . . . Since I came here, I've been wondering quite calmly and reverently whether we didn't make a great mistake two thousand years ago. Has Christianity been a great success?"

"Until the late war . . .," I began.

"The world was becoming better?," she interrupted. "Every one says that, but I believe we were only becoming more efficient mechanically. Were we more meek, more charitable? Did we shew a single one of the

'Christian virtues' more than a cultivated pagan would have shewn? I doubt it, Frank. We were becoming more civilized, not more Christian (you always confuse the two). If the professor's 'gaunt missionaries' had never gone out, would the world of to-day have been very different?"

For a moment, at this point, I remember feeling faintly uneasy. For all her level tone and tranquil manner, Adela was talking as though one spark would set her alight. It was only for a moment. No vine-leaves, I felt, would ever disturb that pale-gold hair; those slender hands would drop from their wrists before they pressed a lover's lips to hers. If she had not been sure of herself, she would never have talked so recklessly.

"Come!," I remonstrated. "If the gaunt missionary gave you your choice now?"

"With my knowledge of what Christianity has accomplished? . . . Well . . . These two thousand years seem to have shewn that the Christian ideal is too high for us to reach. And we lost something when we sent Pan into exile. We're fighting against nature, but we're not winning. And that is what's wrong with every one to-day."

Our discussion was cut short by Miss Arley, who hurried across to tell us that the 'old-fashioned English Christmas' was beginning in earnest and that we were required to play snapdragon.

"And what have you and this sweet man been talking about?," Mrs. Reid demanded of Adela, as we joined the circle by the fire.

"We were trying to decide whether Christianity had been a success," I replied. "As I've not had much experience of anything else . . ."

"Is it necessary?," Peter interrupted. "I seem to remember a king in Herodotus who had to judge between two poets. He heard the first and at once decided the contest by giving the prize to the second. If you're proposing a vote of confidence in the present dispensation . . . Well, from what I've seen of Christianity in the working, I vote for paganism every time."

3

WHILE we talked, the servants were clearing a table, bringing up chairs and filling a vast pewter dish with raisins floating in hot brandy. On the plea that she did not want her fingers burned or made sticky, if she was to play again, my wife remained at the piano. The rest of us gathered round the table; Keith set fire to the brandy; and the lights all over the hall were turned off.

I had not played snapdragon since I was a child; at the end of five minutes I felt that I should not repine if I did not play it again until I entered upon my second childhood. It was noisy, painful and at times dangerous. I burned my fingers till they were sore and swollen, in pursuit of raisins which I did not want. I put out fires on my neighbours' clothes. I grovelled on the floor to rescue blue-flaming threepenny-bits before they could singe the rugs. And, for as long as I could, I concealed from myself that I was hot, cramped, deafened and bored. When the concealment could be no longer sustained, I pusillanimously pushed my chair back and watched the others.

It was a strange sight, these eager faces and shining eyes bent over a witches' cauldron. Against the black-

ness of the panelled walls, the men seemed to have no shoulders or arms: their necks were joined by collars and ties to shirt-fronts of phosphorescent whiteness; their hands, joined to nothing but cuffs, fluttered and darted in the air as though they had been cut off at the wrists and tossed up from the floor. Conversely, the women seemed to have no bodies: their arms and shoulders were visible, dazzlingly white, but their chests and backs ended, abruptly and uncannily, at the dress-line. All were bowed round a flickering sea of blue fire, into which they plunged their hands. The flames, lightening to yellow, clung to their fingers and sometimes wavered for an instant on their lips. Gusts of laughter mingled with whimpers of pain. The fire burned low and was revived with spoonfuls of spirit that sent it lower for a hissing moment; then the flames leapt with a miniature roar that drove the bent, truncated figures back screaming.

As they ventured again into the circle of blue light, I turned to survey the rest of the room. Enid was playing to herself by the light of two shaded candles, her black eyes half-closed, her head thrown back to reveal the soft lines of her throat; the belt of darkness between us made her seem to be outside the room, her rapt expression shewed that she was in another world. In time, when my sight was adjusted to the new conditions, I could make out the five high, mullioned windows, but the moon was now behind a cloud and the shimmering silver of an hour before had turned to sodden grey. It was a strange sight, eerie to the fanciful and, in a grotesque way, beautiful to any eyes.

"I feel like one of those witches in that play," said Mrs. Reid, leaning back and wiping her fingers.

"I feel like a priestess, examining the entrails of the beast I've just sacrificed," said Miss Arley.

"Entrails! Gracious!" screamed Nora, putting her handkerchief to her mouth.

"Miss Arley's thoughts have taken a classical turn," Keith explained.

"Well, if we're all going to Arcady . . .," answered the girl. "You're coming, Mrs. Helmsley?"

"Oh, I think so. As I say, it's a mistake to miss any new experience. I may bring my husband with me? You'll come, won't you, Boy?"

Keith Helmsley waited until he had fed the flickering fire once more.

"I'm not sure," he drawled with his unvarying and meaningless smile. "If we're going to lead a natural life, putting away all pretences, I may find you prefer some other fellow."

"It may be the other way round," said Mrs. Reid. "If this naughty man's been pretending all the time, he may go run off with some other woman."

This pleasantry, I felt, was too near the truth to be amusing, though Nora at least was diverted by it.

"I'd like to see him try!," she cried gaily. "Did you hear what she said, Boy? Come here! Why didn't you deny it with scorn?"

Keith emptied the brandy-bottle into the dish and stood back to see the flames shoot up. He may have been only tired, but I fancied I caught a fleeting expression of unbearable irritation.

"Was it necessary?," he asked. "Heaven and earth may pass away, but my love for you and yours for me . . . This is the last round, everybody: the bottle's empty. Roll up your sleeves! Down you get to it! . . .

When are we all starting, by the way? You can count me in. The natural life. Follow your instincts. Every man do what's right in his own eyes. It sounds perfect. You're coming, Miss Arley?"

"I certainly am!"

As the others waited for the flames to abate their first fierceness, Keith pointed a finger in turn to his wife and Mrs. Reid, Adela and Miss Arley. By now, I thought, there was no question that he was out of temper for some reason; and he seemed to be playing the others' game to keep his irritability in check.

"Five," he counted. "Oh, and Peter: six. You and your wife are standing out, Frank?"

"I should spoil your party," I told him. "You're seeing only the bright side of Arcady; I'm cursed with a gloomy imagination that only sees the dark. You remember how Hobbes described the life of your natural man? '*Solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short*'."

"Cut out the '*solitary*'; and it would be a description of the life that civilized man leads now," said Peter morosely. "Civilized man! Oh, my Lord! . . . Ladies and gentlemen, the motion before the house is one of no-confidence in '*civilization*', no-confidence in '*progress*', no-confidence in the blessings of revealed religion. Those in favour . . ."

There was a chorus of "Aye."

"Those against?"

"No," I said.

"No," added the professor.

"Oh, we can't go to Arcady without the professor!," cried Nora. "I don't know the language, I shouldn't be able to order the waiters about . . ."

"My wife and I are old people . . .," began the professor gravely.

"We'll pop you into a bath of blood," volunteered Peter.

"Even that . . .," the professor smiled. "I should be sorry if you thought I was deserting you after exhibiting this pleasant prospect to your eyes. If it is a choice, though, between the old dispensation and the new, I vote—unhesitatingly and despite all the mysterious charm that has collected about his name—against Pan."

The circle of blue fire was shrinking; and the last flames rallied in the centre of the dish before reaching out desperate tongues to lick the last drops of sustenance. I strolled away to see if, unobserved, I could open a window.

"*For* the motion," I heard Peter say, "Mrs. Reid, Adela, Keith, Nora, Miss Arley and me. Six. *Against*: the professor, Mrs. Professor, Frank and Enid. Four. The 'ayes' have it. To Arcady we go! Or shall we set up Arcady here? Hail, Pan! *Vicisti, Sylvane*. . . . Is the house on fire? Oh, no, it must be Punch's car!"

For a moment I did not understand what he meant. The blue effulgence on the table had flickered and died, leaving us almost blinded. Immediately we were blinded again by a blaze of white. I thought that some one had turned on the lights, but the blaze came from outside the hall, shining through the mullioned windows as though the sky were aflame with sheet-lightning. A moment later we were once more in darkness. I heard the throb of an engine and realized, prosaically, that a pair of powerful head-lamps had been shining on us from the drive.

"My, I was giving up hope!," exclaimed Mrs. Reid. "Turn the lights on, somebody, and ring the bell. They must be famished, poor sweets."

I was moving to the doors, but, before I could cross the room, they were thrown open from outside. Against the glow of the lamps in the courtyard I saw the familiar, squat figure of Punch Escott in silhouette, a dwarf barrel on the legs of a dwarf billiard-table. Behind him came his friend:—I might have said, his antithesis. Whereas Punch was short, his companion was tall; the one was fat, the other lean; Punch strutted in as though he owned the earth, his friend faltered as though he feared to be turned back.

"Hallo! Has every one gone to bed or have the perishing lights fused?," Punch demanded.

Mrs. Reid hastened to the switches and blinded us yet once more.

"We've been playing snapdragon," she explained. "Well, say, this is lovely to see you! Naughty man, scaring me . . . How are you? Come right in! Why, your poor hands are like ice! And you must be famished! I was giving up hope . . ."

"We ought to have been here half-an-hour ago, but Mr. Stranger had a shy fit . . ."

At the mention of his name the tall figure bowed and came forward, limping slightly.

"I felt it was such an imposition," he exclaimed in a low, musical voice. "A stranger in fact as well as in name . . . I only hesitated until I was convinced, against all probability, that I should not be unwelcome."

"Any friend of Lord Escott's is welcome here," answered Mrs. Reid.

4

As soon as the newcomers were established, I tried to slip unobtrusively to bed. My illness had drained my endurance; and conversation, long sustained, was still tiring. To judge from this first night, whether the party were labelled "Bohemian" or "learned", I could see that we should all be expected to talk for many hours each day; and already my head was aching from our discussions of Arcady and Christendom. So, I surmised, would the diffident Stranger's head ache before he had been in the house for many minutes. By the time that Mrs. Reid's introductory hand had guided him to the corner where Enid and I were talking, he seemed utterly dazed and was grateful for a chair, while his hostess hurried away to find out when supper would be ready.

"Rather an ordeal," I said sympathetically. "If you want the names straightened out later, come to me."

He thanked me and accepted the proffered chair, glancing cautiously at the unfamiliar faces of the group by the fire. Before I had time to blunder, I set myself to recall where I had seen Stranger before. Was it with Punch? Or in one of the thousand forgotten encounters of the war, when half the nations of the world seemed to pass through Paris? The face was not remarkable: thin, aquiline, clean-shaven, with arching brows and rather melancholy brown eyes; but I could have sworn that I had met it before somewhere and I resolved that Punch should refresh my memory without delay.

"Did you have a tiring journey?," asked Enid.

He started at the question and withdrew his gaze from the group on the far side of the room. Seated, he looked an athlete. His arms and legs were long and supple, his freckled hands hairy and muscular, his lean face tanned and clear of skin. The rigid bearing and apparent youthfulness suggested that it was in the late war he had been injured, though I felt that, if I had met him in a different setting, I should not have taken him at once for an Englishman. Then, as he told Enid that he was but an indifferent traveller, I decided that, if indeed we had met before, I had certainly not heard Stranger speak. His voice, which had the coo of a dove in some of its notes, was unforgettable.

When Mrs. Reid called out that supper was ready, I tried to escape and only consented to remain in disproof of the charge that we were being "superior."

"If you won't eat, you must have something to drink," she ordained. "In honour of our new guests. The festive season, you know!"

I allowed my glass to be filled with the froth of champagne and then asked leave at least to take Enid up to bed. The professor and Mrs. Shapland had slipped away unnoticed, but the others seemed to be settling down for an all-night sitting. Though Punch Escott's humour is shot with Rabelaisian threads, he has undeniable gusto; and the meal was beginning already to move with a promising abandon. I felt a slight compunction in leaving Stranger unsupported, but he had come with Punch and should have been used to him by now.

"If they're like this the first night," said Enid, edging away, "we're going to waste a lot of nervous tissue before the end of the week."

"Then let's get to bed while we can. Are you tired?"

"Headachy, rather. For its size, this hall is appallingly stuffy. Stale cigars, stale powder . . ."

"Stale whiskey, when Punch came in," I added.

"Stale human beings generally. A travelling-menagerie smell. And it's really rather like a menagerie at feeding-time."

We stopped to look down from the gallery on the heads of the revellers below. Every one was sober, but almost every one was voluble and excited. Keith, at a side-table, was cutting the wire of a champagne-bottle while Punch banged impatiently on the floor with its empty predecessor.

"If I don't have something to drink, I shall begin to cough," he threatened. "I've got a sore throat, through drinking out of a damp glass."

He was seated, one of three, on a small sofa; and I suspect that his disengaged arm was about Nora's waist.

Adela, though aloof from the party, was tolerating it by her proximity; Nora, far from her husband's side and free from his domination, was shrieking at Punch's witticisms; and Miss Arley—still strictly sober, I say again, like all the rest—was becoming noisy in a determined effort to shew a yet keener appreciation of her neighbour's efforts. The only quiet members of the party were Stranger, who looked exhausted and in pain, Mrs. Reid, who stared in some apprehension at her handiwork, and Peter, who was lying asleep in an arm-chair.

"Arcady," I said, with a throw-back to an earlier conversation.

As we watched, Keith flung a cork at Peter and invited him to join the feast.

"I want to sleep," Peter growled.

"A nice glass of wine will make a new man of you," said Keith.

"I don't want to be a new man. I want to sleep. I've had a long train-journey; and I'm tired out."

"Then go to bed," urged Punch. "We don't want any wet-blankets here. Eat, drink and be merry. To-morrow or next day the worms will get at you . . . *Go to bed!*"

Peter half rose, then sank back in his chair.

"I'm too tired. I want to sleep. Sleep . . . It's the only thing, when you're tired. Nature's remedy." His voice became drowsy. "I'm following natural instincts. Lord, when I think . . . stuff drunk . . . ginger me up . . . tired . . . Getting more tired all time . . . Taking more ginger on board . . . Fool's game. Natural thing curl up like dog. See that now. . . . Wonder how many people like taste alcohol. Ginger ninety-nine out hundred, when they'd much better be sleeping. Nature . . . My God, I'm sleepy!"

With a yawn that threatened to split him in two, Peter turned in his chair and became suddenly limp. The others watched him for a moment, smiling. With mock solicitude and most unusual frivolity, Adela covered him with her shawl. Then Keith cut the wire of another bottle; and the meal proceeded.

"The first sensible thing I've heard Peter say," Enid commented at the door of her room.

"If he'll only stick to it . . . Adela seems to be unbending rather."

“ If she’d only follow *her* instincts, poor darling . . . ,” Enid began. “ Good-night, sweetheart! If you’re going down again, send that Arley child up to bed. She’s rather young to be exposed to quite so many natural instincts.”

CHAPTER FIVE

THE EVENING OF THE FIRST DAY

I

I HESITATED for some time before going down to the hall again.

I wish now that I had hesitated longer. When I rejoined the supper-party, the noise had increased so much that I wondered how Peter could sleep through it; and the atmosphere reminded me of certain houses where too many dogs are kept and too little attention is given them.

"Some people," I grumbled, "aren't to be trusted with central heating."

Some people, I might have added, were not to be trusted with gratuitous and unrestricted champagne. As I might have known, Punch Escott had assumed control and was working a rich vein of his characteristic humour, which was received with shrill screams of shocked delight from Nora, who rebuked him at short intervals with playful slaps. Miss Arley, offended or bored, was wandering about the room by herself. Adela and Mrs. Reid had drawn in their chairs to the end of the table where Stranger was sitting. Keith was still acting as butler.

I stayed long enough to refute the charge of being "superior" and then went to my room. Once there, I found that I had also stayed long enough to reach the point at which extreme sleepiness alternates with extreme wakefulness. I was too tired, almost, to undress; too tired, certainly, to compose myself for the night without a book. I returned once more to the hall, as the others separated for bed, and examined the new novels in the rack. Before committing myself, I carried one or two over to a chair by the fire and began to turn their pages. Upstairs, in the gallery, I heard "good-night, good-night" from Keith and Nora as they turned off to what Harry Dennison used to call the "oak rooms"; little Miss Arley waved her hand from the door of the tapestry-room. Adela smiled down on me; and Mrs. Reid explained in a penetrating whisper that I need not turn out the lights, as the night-watchman could see to them. I settled myself in the biggest chair I could find and prospected to find out if my hostess's taste in literature was less incongruous than in house-parties.

I suppose the heat of the hall must have made me drowsy: the next thing I remember is that I awoke to find the lights turned out and the fire a chain of faintly glowing embers, separated by soft bars of grey ash. For some minutes I could not imagine where I was. Then I remembered. Not recalling where the switches were placed, I was groping for a match when one of the doors opened in the gallery above me and a triangle of light flooded to the far wall above my head.

By its reflection I could see that the clock-hands stood at half-past two. I turned in my chair, wondering who was abroad so late, and was about to call for a match, when I overheard a whisper. What was said

I did not catch, but a moment later I saw Keith Helmsley creeping stealthily down the gallery. I use the word "creeping" advisedly, for Keith normally suited his gait to his looks and walked with a debonair and rather empty swagger. He stole away now as though gait and bearing were to give the lie to his looks: a man possibly ashamed of himself and certainly fearful of detection.

Though my brain was still clogged with sleep, I knew that the Helmsleys' rooms were in another wing of the castle. I wondered whose apartment he was leaving so late and so cautiously. If he had been finishing his last cigar with one of the men, he would hardly have changed into a green-silk dressing-gown and slippers; nor would his gossip have lasted till half-past two. If he had not been calling on a man, he must have been calling on a woman. The women of the party, I enumerated, were my wife and his, Mrs. Reid, Mrs. Shapland, Adela and Miss Arley. The Shaplands were in the keep; Jocelyn was in the tapestry-room at the end of the gallery; my wife and I had been allotted the suite over the justice-room, at the top of the Captain's Lodging. I remembered Adela's telling me at dinner that she had been given her "old room", which, so far as I could recall, was in the Constable's Tower,

2

THE hall was once more in darkness; and I sank back into my chair, too nearly stunned even to think. I should have known, even if I had not marked his stealthy tread and bent back, that Keith had not been visiting a man. Restlessness had betrayed itself more than once that night under his *sauve* manner and mechanical

smile; perhaps he would have been less impatient of his wife's adventures in conversation if his mind had not been obsessed by another woman. And yet I could not believe what I had to believe. My credulity was stretched when I heard that he was making Nateby his political headquarters in preference to an hotel, but I knew that Keith did nothing without a purpose; and I had imagined that the hotels of Roxburghshire were not to his liking. What purpose under Heaven could be served by an intrigue with a woman, however rich, who was underbred and ill-educated, vulgar, exasperating and—to me—wholly unattractive? Had Nora threatened to cut off supplies and was he tapping a new source? Had this enigmatic Mrs. Reid been Keith's mistress in other days and was she now refusing to let him go?

And what was my position?

I should have, I realized, to do something. I am no more squeamish than my neighbour, but I do not care for house-parties in which the moral standard is borrowed from the farm-yard; and, if we are to have farm-yard morals at all, the hostess should either know nothing about them or else give her guests frank warning what they have to expect. I was incensed against Mrs. Reid: she had no business to invite my wife to a party of this kind; and she would incur a heavy responsibility if a young girl like Miss Arley came to harm in her house.

"Thank God for uncle John," I said to myself. "The first train in the morning . . ."

Before we left, I thought, Adela must be warned; and, if my wife felt equal to dropping Miss Arley a hint, she should. The more I thought of Mrs. Reid, the more angry I became, though I see now that a great part of my anger was due to pique. When she talked to me, at

our first meeting in London, of the men who had loved her to distraction, I dismissed her as a vain, stupid woman who must talk about herself or die. Her flirtations, I was prepared to wager, were affairs of the imagination. I was absurdly exasperated at being required to believe that this egotistic, but apparently cold-blooded, creature was a woman of passion and that she should have misled me by speaking the truth. In one of our discussions, too, she had hinted with atrocious cynicism that, when all pretences and conventions were shed, Nora might find her husband leaving her for another woman.

"If this is a foretaste of Arcady," I decided, "the sooner I'm out of it the better."

Then I collected my books and went upstairs. I walked as quietly as I could, but some of the stairs creaked; and I halted at the beginning of the gallery for fear of being overheard. Lights were still burning behind the middle door; and its outer lines were marked with three bars of yellow. There was no sound within; and, after a few moments, I proceeded cautiously along the gallery. When I came opposite the door, a board gave beneath my foot; and, as I paused again, the door was opened six inches.

"Have you lost your way?," a voice whispered.

It was almost the last voice that I could have expected; and this, on the top of so many shocks, proved too much for my nerves. I let my books slip from under my arm. A hand shot out to recover them. Another hand caught at my wrist. And the voice whispered petulantly:

"Idiot! You'll wake everybody up! Come in here!"

I resisted for a moment, to spare the wretched woman a greater shock than any I had undergone. My face

could not be seen; but impatient fingers, touching the hard edge of my cuff where they had expected the silk of Keith's dressing-gown, discovered that I was not Keith; and I, fearing the consequences of the discovery, yielded and came in. The voice had already told me that I had done Mrs. Reid a hideous injustice; I did not need the testimony of my eyes to know that I was in Adela's room, face to face with Adela herself.

Adela's room. "My old room", as she called it. I remembered now that it was this room, not the one in the Constable's Tower, which she had been given before. I had kissed her hand at this door a hundred times in the days when I schemed to get my first glimpse of her in the morning and my last at night.

"You . . .!", she gasped.

"My God!", I whispered.

I covered my face, hoping—I believe—that, when I pulled my hand away, I should find I had been dreaming. It was no dream. Though I could see nothing, I heard her panting, swallowing.

Then we both tried to recover ourselves. I forget who spoke first. I fancy, indeed, that we both spoke together. With gabbling prolixity I recounted how I had fallen asleep in the hall; and Adela—after a defiant "That's all right, but why 'My God!'?"—explained simultaneously that she had heard footsteps and was wondering if a burglar had broken in.

"When you kept stopping, I thought it was somebody taken ill," she continued, her eyes avoiding mine and fixed on my chin.

"I must have been asleep for nearly an hour," I went on.

"Is it very late?," she interrupted herself to ask.

"I haven't finished undressing yet. This book Enid recommended me . . . Have you read it yet?"

"It's nearly three," I answered. "You didn't go up till one."

After talking simultaneously, we stopped simultaneously; and Adela searched my face with eyes that were by now calm and determined. It was for me, this time, to look away. The spark, then, had fallen and set her alight. Farm-yard morals, the beasts of the field: the phrase I had coined clashed with one of her own favourites. I wondered how she would have described this adventure if another woman had been in her place. Adela the puritan had all a puritan's relish for mordant phrasing. Would she have called it "being seduced by a fashion-plate" or "committing adultery with a tailor's model"?

I do not pretend to recall my emotions clearly; I do not imagine there was anything clear to recall. Numbing disillusion, like the spread pain of a recent wound, prevented my examining the extent of my hurts. I was preoccupied with trifles. "This," I kept telling myself, "is something new in your experience. Thank Heaven, you've never taken a woman in this position before. If you had, perhaps you'd know what to do next." I could not devise a formula for getting myself out of the room. I could not imagine our next meeting.

Somewhere in the house a clock struck three. Simultaneously we found that we could no longer remain silent.

"Adela . . ." I began.

"It's well for you that your reputation is above reproach," she observed, with a smile. "Wandering about at this time of night . . ."

I stood up, staring at my watch as though I had not heard the clock strike a moment before. Adela's tone of banter made me realize for the first time that she did not know how much I knew or suspected. There was reason for her perturbation when we met face to face, but she was calm again now. Perhaps she was telling herself that, when I exclaimed "My God", I was betraying my own guilty alarms at being caught so late afoot. Should I let her think I knew nothing?

"I leave my reputation to take care of itself," I answered. "At the same time, perhaps this is not a very discreet place or a very discreet moment for us to be talking. If any other night-prowler heard us . . ."

I meant what I said, no less and no more, without an idea of trapping Adela into an admission. She must have been on tiptoes to grasp an ambiguous phrase, for she broke in to ask, like an examining counsel, how long it was—almost in minutes and seconds—since I woke up.

"And did you wake of your own accord?," she enquired, adding as an afterthought, "or did the night-watchman move you on?"

I had no time to decide whether she would prefer to believe that I knew nothing or everything; but I felt—and I still feel—that it was better for me to speak the embarrassing truth than to manufacture a reassuring lie which she would not believe.

"A house like this is full of odd noises . . ." I began.

"That's not what I meant," she interrupted.

Looking up, I found that her eyes were still on mine; and their expression was that of the dispassionate hunter for facts.

"I thought I heard footsteps," I told her.

"Thought?"

"What d'you *want* me to say, Adela?"

Her eyes left mine; and she smiled in self-possession that succeeded in being unassailable without becoming impudent:

"You can say whether you were surprised."

3

OUR skirmishing, then, was ended, on her initiative.

I was thankful that, when suspicion had unnerved her, certainty left her calm. Fy own mind was clearer by now; and I am conscious that for the next few minutes I was trying to keep the truth at arm's length and to recreate the illusion which she had shattered. If I could not protect her, I must protect myself.

"It takes a good deal to surprise me . . .," I fenced. "Adela, I must go to bed! I'm still a semi-invalid . . ."

"When you scattered those books . . . Who did you *think* it was?"

Could I hope that she was playing for time and would save me by an excuse however improbable? I was ready to supply one myself. I would, on the slightest encouragement, believe that Nora was ill and that Keith had come to borrow brandy, aspirin. I would forget all I had suspected.

"Mrs. Reid, to be quite candid," I found myself answering.

"Henrietta? It's all talk with her." Observing my bewilderment, I suppose, Adela pointed to a chair and sat down on the rug in front of the fire. "She tries to flirt with Keith, as she tries to be intelligent with the

professor, but, if any man came to her room, she'd raise an alarm. I've forgotten the name of her complex, but it's quite a common one. If she had any passions, she wouldn't talk about them so much. She's a kind, well-meaning soul, but she's false all through. And to pretend you have great, overmastering hungers when you haven't is even sillier than to pretend you haven't when you have. I know something about that," she sighed. "I've done it myself for so many weary years. And it's made me so ill and miserable. *Now . . .*"

After boasting that I was not easily surprised, I tried to live up to my boast.

"Somehow I didn't expect to hear this from *you*," was all I would say.

"I didn't expect to hear it from myself," she answered good-humouredly. "I'd repressed myself so long that I never thought I should break free. If you spend half your life bent double, you'd think you could never walk upright again. Thank Heaven I've come to my senses in time."

The phrase did not seem happily chosen for a process more usually described as losing one's head, but Adela seemed to have changed her outlook in the moment when the ideal of chastity was dismissed as a "repression". I could not understand her. I could hardly realize that I was awake. For her, of all women, to be philandering was incredible enough, but that she should be discussing with me the ethics and advantages of philandering in general was only one degree less amazing than that she should explain this particular intrigue with Keith. And this is what she quickly proceeded to do.

"He wanted to marry me for years," she announced,

as though this justified everything. "Right from the time when Jack Sebright was killed . . ."

"Why on earth didn't you marry him?," I interrupted. "Instead of letting him get tied up with Nora . . ."

Adela shook her head slowly and stared into the fire. If she had not given me implicit permission to say what I liked, I should not have broached the subject of marriage; and I was startled to realize that this was the first time, since I called to sympathize nine years before, that I had heard her mention Sebright's name.

"When Jack was killed, I never thought I could care for any one again," she continued dispassionately. "Keith . . . and Peter . . . and several others: they were all in love with me, but to be *touched* by a man who wasn't Jack . . . Horrible!" She clasped her bare arms convulsively across her breast, as though she was being assaulted. "Jack and I were in love with our minds as well as our hearts. I never thought of us as man and woman. But the others . . . I could see it in their eyes, even in yours, Frank . . . You all thought of me first as something to be kissed and caressed. That frightened me. It disgusted me! To be touched at all! I wanted sex to be burnt out of my life, out of all our lives. I wouldn't admit that it was as natural as eating or drinking. . . . That's the reason I took up my present work. I wanted to save the girls who'd gone wrong through sex, I wanted to keep the others straight. Or so I told myself. Sometimes I found myself wondering if I wasn't really fascinated by the things they told me . . . And then I dug deeper into all the horrors I could hear, in the hope of sickening myself . . . Mad . . . I *must* have

been mad, though I wouldn't admit it for a long time. When I couldn't doubt it any longer, I went to a psychoanalyst; and he tried to shew me the terrible complexes I was setting up by trampling nature under foot. That only made it worse: I trampled all the harder. Until to-night . . . To-night I came to my senses."

Spoken with quiet satisfaction, the phrase sounded even less well-chosen at the second hearing. Adela was not thinking aloud: she was explaining herself deliberately and without embarrassment, for the relief of describing her escape from a torture-chamber and almost in the expectation of winning my approval. As she talked, her earlier manner of blithe assurance warmed to something like radiance. She looked happy, as in the days of her engagement to Sebright ten years before; and she seemed to have become ten years younger. It was not my business to play the judge; but I felt that, if I had tried to rebuke or reason with her, I could not have made myself understood.

"It's a pity you didn't see things in this light a bit earlier," I said.

"Before Nora came on the scene? She made no difference. I should never have married Keith, I was never in love with him. I'm not in love with him now."

"Then why, in Heaven's name . . . ?," I began.

"He was in love with me. He's very attractive, though I'm afraid he's terribly on the make. Marrying that poor common creature simply for her money. And then being insufferably rude and cruel to her. I wouldn't be *married* to Keith for anything. In his power . . . But I liked him better than most men. I should have preferred Peter, of course."

It was on the tip of my tongue to say that I could easily convey a message to that effect; but I believe Adela would have accepted the proposal literally. Her mood baffled me. Her level moderation robbed me of speech. If I had seen a policeman scrambling the contents of a jeweller's shop, if I had heard a nun saying that she had come to her senses and would walk abroad in future without clothes, I should have felt that the world was less topsy-turvy than when Adela Glynde expounded that, while some men were better than others, any man was better than none.

"*You* might not have married Keith," I said, "but Nora *has*."

"She's very sick of him," answered Adela.

"She has reason to be," I suggested.

"I didn't mean that. I meant that she'd tired of him even before he tired of her. She doesn't understand him. He's too subtile for her. Imagine yourself married to a barmaid! . . . I don't know quite the type of man who appeals to Nora. Perhaps she doesn't either, but she's trying very hard to find him. I shouldn't be surprised if Punch Escott . . ."

"Good Heavens!," I exclaimed.

"Did you see her at supper to-night? She'd found somebody at last who talked her native language. All her airs and graces are put on; and I should think they were stifling her. You needn't pity Nora on *my* account."

This, I remember, was Adela's nearest approach to an admission that she had borrowed another woman's husband or that hostile critics would say she had. After the first moments of our encounter, when the old Adela tried—I suppose, from force of habit—to assert herself against the new, she spoke without concealment, without

shame and without fear. She did not beg me to screen her; and I could imagine her asking in amazement why a screen should be needed when a sick woman was made whole and a mad woman came to her senses.

Was I ashamed of nature?

4

LISTENING, watching, shifting in my chair to be sure I was awake, I fumbled for a word that should describe her new attitude to life. It was not depraved, though it might be called abandoned. And yet I have never watched or listened to a less abandoned woman, though I have seldom heard more abandoned thoughts than those to which she gave utterance that night.

Once or twice I fancied that I must be hypnotized by a superb actress who was covering her embarrassment and my surprise by convincing me that there was no cause for surprise or embarrassment. She never faltered, never watched for the effect of her performance. Once or twice, since I had tried and failed to believe that I was dreaming, I pretended that I was delirious again, as during my spell of influenza. My head was hot, my hands were cold; but I could count the pearls round Adela's neck and read the titles of the books on her table. Once or twice, more than once or twice, I wished that she or I or both of us had died before she killed my faith in her.

And then I began to doubt again. If I had not seen Keith creeping out of her room, I would have gone to the stake for what Adela herself, a few hours before, would have called her "virtue". She should have borne some stigma of depravity, but in choice of language and

in behaviour she exhibited the modesty of a young girl. Nothing of depravity here. And she looked a girl of eighteen, with her long yellow hair falling about the soft line of her shoulders and her cheeks gently flushed from the heat of the fire. Her eyes were shining mysteriously; and she smiled with serene contentment. I had seen that same serene light in the eyes of women, theretofore harassed and uncertain, who gave themselves to a religion that embraced their souls, minds and bodies. Abruptly, in my own more conventional way, I too came to my senses. As though I had passed half-dreaming from a play-house fantasy to the jostle of the streets, I saw this episode in its relation to the normal opinion of normal men and women. I remembered resolving, as I came upstairs, that I must get Enid away and that, before she went, she should give little Jocelyn Arley a maternal warning. Then I recollected that a warning was to have been given to Adela, too; and the world seemed once more to stand on its head.

"What's going to happen now?," I asked.

At my question, Adela roused from her smiling dream and stretched herself luxuriously. I had known her so well and regarded her so long as a woman without passions that I had forgotten the beauty of her features and the grace of her movements. I remembered now why Harry and I, Punch and Jack, Keith and Peter, had all been in love with her.

"Happen now?," she repeated. "I must go to bed. It's terribly late; and I'm tired out."

"But afterwards?," I persisted.

"I don't understand. Are you thinking of Nora? I've told you there's no need for you to pity her. She drifted away from Keith a long time ago. They were

both very sensible about it. There was no point in having a divorce, because a scandal would have interfered with his career: he didn't want to lose her money and she didn't want to lose his position. It's not natural, though, to keep people yoked together when they're not attracted. If *he's* happy and *she's* happy and *Punch* is happy . . ."

"Does Keith know about Punch?," I interrupted.

"There's nothing to know at present. Nora has always been afraid to let herself go. I should think *now*, especially when she sees that it *is* the natural thing for her to do . . ."

Her variations on this theme were beginning to exasperate me. So far as I could understand Adela's reasoning at all, anything that could be called "natural" stood justified and beyond criticism.

"I've heard of such arrangements," I said, "though I've never been privileged to see them being made. I find it rather bewildering. That *you* of all people . . . I must go to bed. I can't deceive myself into thinking it's a nightmare, though when you say you've 'come to your senses' . . . My God, Adela!"

I could not look her in the eyes; and, as I turned away, her arms reached out and met about my neck.

"Need you grudge me my happiness?," she pleaded. "There was a time when it seemed to mean a lot to you; and I haven't had so very much in the last nine years." I made a movement to extricate myself; and she laughed sadly. "All right, I'm not trying to steal you. I'm too fond of Enid, though I suppose, if we behaved naturally . . ."

I worked free of her arms and stepped back. At some time that evening I had told myself that Adela's white

hands would rot off their wrists before she used them to draw a man's lips to hers. Not only was she on fire herself: she inflamed every one she touched.

"This talk of nature . . . !," I exclaimed.

"I told you to-night I didn't think I should have the courage. I said that, if ever I led a normal life, it would be as an act of desperation. I don't know what turned the scale to-night. Hitherto I've been held back by so many things: all one is taught as a child, all one teaches other people. I told you this evening that the other way was the finer way if you were strong enough to follow it; and, the moment I said it, I realized that, if I'd been strong enough to follow it, I shouldn't have been ill and miserable. I think that decided me. And then finding Keith in the house, at his wits' end over that poor creature's stupidities . . ."

"And leaving her to console herself with Punch," I mocked.

"It was natural, wasn't it?"

"In the world of nature I doubt if you'd find this neat pairing and sorting," I said. "All that smacks of a most unnatural sophistication."

"Because we're not living a natural life . . . yet."

Her thoughtful tone, faintly touched with regret, filled me with helpless dismay. I looked for any signs that would entitle me to call her mad, but she was speaking with the moderation of the political idealist who admits that some act is only "a measure of complete protection" or "an instalment of socialism".

"There are to be further developments?," I enquired ironically. "You can improve on this perfect pairing?"

"It isn't perfect," she corrected me with a slight frown. "I've told you I'm not in love with Keith. I like

him." . . . As she paused, I wondered whether she was going to add: "*He's better than no one*". I walked to the door. "I like him, but I shouldn't break my heart if I never saw him again. He's not to be compared with Peter." . . .

"How convenient for you that they're both here!," I observed.

"It's anything but convenient that they're both here at the same time," she answered with the first hint of impatience that she had shewn.

5

I could reason with her no more. Borrowing a candle, I said good-night and walked in waking delirium along the gallery. As I turned the corner to my own room, I heard a low whistle. A squat figure advanced into the circle of light; and I saw—by this time, without surprise—the grinning, sensual face of Punch Escott.

"I won't tell if you won't, old boy," he whispered. "Hang together if you don't want to hang separately, 'specially when you're married. Come and have a drink in my room."

"Not at this hour of the night, thanks," I answered.

"Better than hanging round strange doors at this hour of the night," he retorted. "Not that I blame you, old boy. My worst enemy wouldn't call me censorious. Make hay before the worms get at you."

"I've been fetching myself a book," I said.

"Likely story," he jeered.

"It happens to be true."

"Then I've made better use of my opportunities than you have," he chuckled.

“ ‘ *Life is short, my dear friends,
 ‘ And deny it no one can ;
 ‘ So it seems much the better plan
 ‘ To enjoy it before it ends.*’

My sentiments! My sentiments to a T, old boy. Be good fellow and come in! I’ve a lot to talk to you about. The young women of the present day. Fie, fie!

‘ *My name is Miss Nineteen-Twenty-Four ;
 ‘ All you can tell me I’ve heard before.
 ‘ I could teach you a thing or two, no doubt ;
 ‘ And what I don’t know I can soon find out.*’

I made that up, old boy! Pretty good, what? You never thought we had a poet in the house, did you? I promise you, old boy, there are odder things even than poets in this house. Come in; and I’ll tell you all about it!”

We parted at the door of his room.

CHAPTER SIX

NATURAL LAWS

I

THERE was little time left for sleeping; and what there was I neglected. Between half-past three and eight I had first of all to make sure that I was in my right mind, then that I had really seen and heard a number of things that I was already beginning to disbelieve; and, after that, I had to decide what must be done.

The communicating-door between my wife's room and mine was open; and by the light of the fire I could see Enid peacefully sleeping, the oval of her pale face framed in thick plaits of black hair. She, then, was real; and we had really come to this place together. On the table by her bed was a book in a vivid yellow-and-black binding. I recognized it as one that Mrs. Shapland had urged her to read. The Shaplands, then, were real and really here. Were Keith and Adela equally real?

In my hand was the candle-stick which I had lately borrowed. So I had not been dreaming. What should I tell Enid? Unless I gave some reason, she would protest at being dragged back to London at the beginning of our visit. I wondered how much to tell her. For a woman, my wife is broad-minded. She does not

insist that no one shall be allowed more liberty than she herself enjoys nor that all who fail to fit our social system are to be condemned unheard. She would probably find excuses for anything that such a woman as Nora Helmsley might do under such provocation as Keith gave her, though under similar provocation from me she would be restrained by personal pride from sinking to my level. She would continue to receive the Helmsleys, as she continued to meet Punch Escott, until she was convinced that those who still hesitated to defy society were being encouraged by her toleration to forget their fears. And, even if a woman like Nora had to be discountenanced as a corruptive example, Enid would feel no objection to meeting her privately. This is not to say that she has any liking for laxity or that she condones anything that threatens marriage and the family; but she feels and states without qualification that, if mediaeval marriage-laws are applied inflexibly to the restless, impatient twentieth century, the family will be not so much threatened as extinguished.

I am far from sure, however, that my wife's toleration would extend beyond those who are driven, with or without divorce, to a life less wretched than a loveless marriage. She has no mercy on men like Keith who marry without the least intention of being faithful to their wives; and she has no patience with the woman of any age who wants to be a mother without being a wife or to take a lover instead of a husband. Had she heard the astounding justification which Adela offered me overnight, she would have cut it to ribbons. Had I tried to support a justification that had wholly failed to convince me, she would only have thought that I was blinded by partiality for Adela. I decided that I could

tell Enid very little. Already she had gone farther than most women in accepting as a friend some one with whom her husband had notoriously been in love not five years before; she remained staunch to Adela when Adela was perversely seeing how many friendships she could kill. And she had more than once been lectured for her "worldliness" by the austere young judge who would soon require all the sympathy that the "worldliest" understanding could supply.

"Adela may tell her," I decided. "I daresay she will. *I can't.*"

At the same time I decided that I could not leave Nateby. When I was called, I might receive a note from Adela; more probably I should find, when I got up, that she had left the castle. If, however, she stayed on, I must stay too, for, if she stayed, it would mean that she was unfit to take care of herself. And nothing that she could do would change the past or dispense me from the duty of protecting her.

As I undressed, I took my temperature. It was high, but not high enough to excuse my believing the evidence of my own eyes and ears.

"My name is Miss Nineteen-Twenty-Four ;

"All you can tell me I've heard before."

Punch's ridiculous jingle was still running in my head. I could not doubt that I had met him or that he was adding his share to a confusion that promised to become unending.

"We must see this out . . ." I found myself saying.

It was not mere curiosity that moved me. As a bachelor I had been in parties very similar to what this threatened to become; I had seen one person acquiescing,

a second protesting and a third shaking the dust of a house from his shoes. A party that begins with promiscuous alliances not infrequently ends with promiscuous feuds; and in the welter of jealousy and recrimination that accompanied the break-up of such a party I noticed that the absent, however blameless, were more harshly tongue-lashed than the present, however guilty. I decided that we must stay in self-defence.

2

THEN I undressed and went to bed. I was still pursuing sleep in a vain courtship when my tea was brought me; and the stigma of a restless night was visible in my face as I caught sight of my reflection in the mirror. The tea came unaccompanied by any note; and I could glean no news of Adela when Peter Colyton drifted in halfway through the morning to describe the arrangements for the day.

"Some of us were thinking of a walk over the moors," he explained. "I want to blow away the frowst of that train yesterday. Mrs. Reid was wondering whether you'd like to take the others round the castle. You'll have to do it some time," he added with a grin.

"I'll do whatever any one likes," I said. Then it occurred to me to wonder whether Peter had heard anything of our comings and goings in the night. "How did you sleep?"

"Magnificently, thanks. I always do up here. Jove, it's good to be back again, Frank. I never thought I should fancy the place without Harry, but we had some

thundering good times here and there's no reason why we shouldn't have some good times again. I was fond of Harry, but you can't expect to live for ever and it's better to go off in your prime than to die of slow decay." He walked to the window and looked down on the courtyard. "Remember the night when we all sent you off and assured you there'd be no war?"

"I remember it well."

"Gad, we soon saw our mistake! And you had the laugh of us then! Jack first; then Harry . . . Lady Dennison told me she shoved up a memorial window to Harry in the chapel. I didn't tell *her*, of course, but I feel this memorial business has been frightfully overdone. I should have thought any one who was mixed up in the war would want to forget about it as soon as possible."

As this had been Peter's apparent wish ever since the armistice, I did not understand why he insisted on talking about it now.

"If you'd lost your only son . . .," I began in defence of Lady Dennison.

"Oh, I know that's the common view," he interrupted, "but I don't see where the thing is to end. Since man appeared first on this troubled planet, the dead have come to outnumber the living quite considerably; and these memorials to people who fell in the great war, the hundred years' war, the Persian war, the siege of Troy are becoming a new form of ancestor-worship. We shall soon think it hardly respectable for any one to be alive. I call that sort of thing morbid. When a fellow's dead, say I, shovel him out of sight and forget about him. You don't see a pack of wolves sentimentalizing over the dear departed: according to Kipling . . . But I

mustn't stay here talking, or these others will have my blood. Good-bye!"

As he ran whistling from the room, I tried to remember his expression and manner before he turned away to the window. His spirits were high, his voice was jovial. Had he been fortifying himself against his walk over the moors? The light-hearted ferocity of his conversation was the kind of effect that Peter achieved nowadays when he remembered that he once enjoyed a reputation for epigram and paradox; it was in doubtful taste and but moderately amusing. I had seen this type of squib exploding so often, always laboriously and always damp from the same cause. I had not, however, found him discharging fire-works about the war; and I wondered whether this new callousness marked a stage in his recovery. More unlikely things had happened in my own experience: deaf men had recovered their hearing at certain notes or chords; paralytics, for no obvious reason, had regained power over their limbs. Was it too much to hope that Peter, finding himself in a setting which he had almost forgotten, was unconsciously expunging everything that had happened since he was there before?

I went into my wife's room; but, before I could ask for her impressions of Peter, I had to explain my own appearance.

"My dear! What's the matter? You look absolutely washed-out!," she exclaimed. "Were you very late? I didn't hear you come in."

"I was very late indeed," I answered. "I fell asleep in a chair and was left for dead." It occurred to me that, if our night-perambulations were to be made public, I would sooner that she heard of my share

from me than from Punch. "I stopped for a talk with Adela on my way up; and that made me even later."

"You didn't go into her room, I *hope*," said Enid with a smile.

"Indeed I did. Adela's becoming . . . quite modern."

"Well, with the present collection . . . I'm afraid Punch doesn't improve. I can't make out how he has such nice friends. Mr. Stranger is charming."

"Let's hope Stranger is saying the same thing about us. It's an odd gathering. If you make up your mind not to be surprised by anything you see or hear . . . I must get dressed, by the way. I've promised to take a party round the castle."

I cannot say that I hurried over my dressing. As no car had driven into the courtyard, I had to assume that Adela had not left; and, if I had been the culprit, if she had surprised me red-handed, I could not have been more reluctant to meet her. To my relief, the hall was empty, when at last I went down. Outside, a warm sun was shining; the wind was blowing softly from the west; and I felt a heady, mistimed quality of spring in the air. The great doors were standing open to the courtyard; and I discovered Stranger sitting on the battlements without an overcoat, throwing crumbs to a circle of birds. They scattered at my approach, but twittered back as he whistled to them. He explained that the pedestrians had started already and that we were to begin luncheon without them if they were late. His tone, still more the wistfulness in his melancholy brown eyes made me think of a dog that has been left behind.

"I hope you didn't stay just to tell me this," I said.

Involuntarily he glanced at his foot.

"I don't suppose I could have kept up with them," he answered.

I tried to cover my blunder by enquiring whether Punch Escott had been pressed into the party.

"If so," I said, "it's the first time he's taken any exercise since he left Eton. Even in the war he drove an armoured-car. It required exertion, but he had somewhere to sit."

"It was he who started the idea of the walk," Stranger replied with a laugh. "Well, it is rather a shame to be indoors on a day like this."

"Are they communing with nature in mass?," I enquired.

"Miss Arley and he were ready first, so they went off together. Then Miss Glynde and Colyton. Mrs. Reid is following with a car and a luncheon-basket. Some of them talked of picnicking on the moors."

Knowing the treachery of the winter sunshine on these rain-swept wastes, I could not repress a shiver:

"In December? I surrender the privilege of communing with nature on those terms to any one who will accept it."

Stranger laughed pleasantly and called to a robin till it hopped fearlessly on to his outstretched finger. It was evident that we should not agree on the magic of the country, which for him was independent of season and temperature.

"It depends where your life has been spent," he answered. "You're accustomed to the life of great capitals. Will you understand me when I say that a

big city oppresses me with its desolation, whereas in the country I could not be lonely if I tried? The songs of the birds, the rustling of the leaves, the creaking and chirping of a myriad tiny insects . . . Ah, good morning, Mrs. Kingsbury! You are another of the people who think that, in December, fresh air should keep itself to itself?"

My wife's arrival prevented my hinting, even had I wished to do so, that another motive than affection for chirping insects and rustling leaves may have underlain the unexpected enthusiasm which some of my fellow-guests were exhibiting for nature in one of her more repellent guises. Punch Escott, who was leading the stampede, regarded fresh air with as keen a detestation as exercise: I was convinced that, after his escapades of the night before, he was only facing the two simultaneously for the sake of escaping an awkward encounter with the Helmsleys. For the same reason, Adela was no doubt shy of meeting me after her late confidences.

Leaving Enid with Stranger, I went to see if Mrs. Reid would care to join our tour of the castle. I found her, after long search, in gauntlets and an apron, decorating the pulpit in the chapel. The revelation of such homeliness surprised me into forgetting my errand; and I stayed to talk while she filled the windows with vases of white chrysanthemums. As a girl, she told me, she had always decorated the church at home; and, now that the chance came again, she could not resist it. At first I thought she spoke apologetically, but soon she was turning over old memories with a wistful eagerness that overcame her self-consciousness. I found myself listening to stories of her girlhood in a pioneer-town of the

middle-west. Her father had come from England, her mother was of German extraction; and Christmas was the most memorable week of the year. No doubt, she said, everything would seem very small and crude if she went back now to her birth-place, but none of the great houses which she had occupied in the great cities where she had lived would ever dwarf the memory of one square two-storeyed building on the corner of a broad, uneven street. Chicago, in those days, seemed an unattainable heaven; New York was not so much unattainable as unimaginable. Of Europe she had only a confused and terrifying conception, as of a burnt-out sun: history had moved away from Europe, leaving only corruption behind.

As she talked and busied herself with the flowers, I wondered how she had been able to brace herself for succeeding shocks of discovery. The answer, I think, must have been that she had long ceased to think, perhaps even to assimilate. She revolved quickly and noisily in a world that was not her own, without sharply defined likes or ambitions or purposes. Some one—Lady Dennison or her like—had persuaded her that she must aim at a commanding social position; some one else had indicated how she should do it. In her turn, I felt sure, she was shewing Miss Arley that this was the only life to lead and that England—or at least Europe—was the only place in which to lead it.

As the name floated into my thoughts, I tried to reconcile this simple and rather pathetic little woman, who decorated the chapel because it reminded her of childhood, with the strident, assertive huntress who wore herself out in collecting distinguished and undistinguished strangers. I tried to picture Mrs. Reid at Jocelyn Arley's

age, when she was young instead of being a copy of youth, eager instead of feverish, modest by nature instead of shameless by hard practice. What would she have thought, at this girl's age, if she had seen herself agonizing to get such a man as Lord Escott into her house? The rest of us by now were grown used to Punch; I wondered what this girl thought of him.

Then I stopped short in horror. According to Stranger's account, Punch Escott had set out with Miss Arley; and I had admired his cynical prudence in avoiding Nora Helmsley. I suddenly remembered that, when I met Punch in the light of a candle, he was standing outside the tapestry-room.

"My name is Miss Nineteen-Twenty-Four ;

"All you can tell me I've heard before."

The accursed jingle was still running through my head, but it now had a possible meaning. I must have made some exclamation, for Mrs. Reid asked if anything was the matter.

"My! You look as if you'd seen a ghost!," she added.

"I've just remembered these people are all waiting for me," I improvised. "I must fly. You say you're going to join the walking party?"

As I hurried back to the battlements, I said that it was time for me to pull myself together. Because a man is found outside a room, he need never have been inside. Poorly as I had good reason to think of Punch, I believed that he would respect youth and innocence; slightly as I knew Miss Arley, I would not dishonour her by speaking her name and Punch's in the same breath. I remembered my last glimpse of her as she leant to wave

good-night from the gallery: slender and small, with thin arms and a figure that had not yet begun to develop. It was unthinkable that, when I met Punch, he was coming from her.

And yet, if I had met Keith in the gallery, it would have been unthinkable that he was coming from Adela.

3

UP to the present, I feel my narrative has been simple. Those to whom I am presenting the facts of the "Nateby Castle case" may believe me or not; they may feel that I have failed to divest myself of prejudice; they may doubt my insight into psychology or my competence in portraiture. I do not think that hitherto they can have questioned my good faith: no man had tried more conscientiously to paint the thing as he saw it.

My difficulty now is that I am no longer quite certain what picture I am trying to paint. Instead of watching a procession from a point of rest, I feel that I am myself moving with the procession. Whenever I make a statement, I have to make it without the old sense of authority. I seem to be standing with one foot in the street of to-day and the other in Bedlam.

When I hurried apologetically back to the battlements, I found my wife and the Shaplands talking to Stranger about some point of bird-lore. As I listened, I wondered what they would think if I told them of my discoveries and suspicions of the last twelve hours. The little professor and his motherly Scotch wife were reassuringly normal; what would they say if I described the jungle-life which seemed to be breaking out under our eyes?

What would Enid or Stranger think? What should I think, myself, when the pedestrians returned and I saw them in calm daylight? They would say I was mad. And yet I had not imagined that meeting in Adela's room. Were *they* mad: Keith and Adela and Punch and Jocelyn Arley? What had driven them mad? We were not playing a scene from the *Midsummer Night's Dream*; I was altogether too prosaic to fancy that Mrs. Reid had been mixing love-potions for her guests. . . .

This is what I mean when I say that I had no point of rest for watching the procession. Jocelyn Arley! Already I was recoiling in horror from the dreadful suspicion which I had allowed to pass through my mind; yet the certainty which Adela had forced on me was far more dreadful. And always, before I had time to determine what I believed, my attention was demanded in another quarter. While I debated whether to ask Enid if I was behaving and speaking rationally, the professor touched my arm and murmured:

"Well, Mr. Guide?"

The next three hours were passed in Roman Britain and pre-Reformation England.

Leaving the pictures, the books and the manuscripts for another day, we explored the castle, inside and out, until a distant gong summoned us to luncheon. I was shy at first of instructing the professor in history that was for the most part based on tradition, but he put me at ease by admitting that he was not an antiquarian; and before long I found myself challenging him to deny my cherished hypothesis that Nateby had been continuously occupied for a longer period than any single house or fortification in England. At the one end, the

records in the muniment-room under the library carried us back to the accession of King Stephen; at the other, the ruined aqueduct and the pavement below the chapel brought us up to the beginning of the fifth century from a time somewhere towards the end of the second. Stating my proposition colloquially, I submitted that a place which was good enough for the Romans and Normans to fortify was good enough to be kept or reset in commission during the centuries of Saxon or Danish rule. The northern raiders of the eighth century had poured through the same passes and followed the same valleys in the Cheviots as the raiders of the third. The corsairs of Scandinavia had beached their long-boats on the same sands or nosed inland up the same creeks in one century as in another, to be checked and thrown back at the same point.

"You want to establish that this place has been continuously occupied for eighteen hundred years?," asked the professor. "There's a *prima facie* likelihood. And then?"

I called to mind the phrase that Adela had used overnight in describing the castle as a monument of aggression. There must have been bloody chapters in the history of Nateby. In punitive expeditions against the barbarians, in the service of this king or that, in defence of one religion or another, in the prosecution of justice and the pursuit of revenge, in lust for aggrandizement or search of plunder, the neighbouring country must have been regularly wasted, the inhabitants punctually put to the sword. In the vaults below the armoury, poor wretches must have cowered for mercy and screamed for death. Straight limbs had been wrenched crooked, fair bodies had been crushed and torn, branded

and slashed. The dreadful engines of torture were extant still; and no one had used them for his own vile amusement, but always in the name of religion or patriotism or security and order. I recalled Peter Colyton's bitter ejaculation that, after sampling the blessings of civilization and revealed religion, he had no hesitation in voting for anything else.

"Oh, moralize if you will," I said. "If you're fond of the obvious, you may exclaim: 'What tales these walls could tell!' If you're Mrs. Reid, you can think what a collection of autographs you would have had if every one had signed the visitors' book on his way to or from Scotland. Or you can think of this place—some fortification on this spot—standing like a light-house while waves of Romans and Saxons and Danes and Normans rolled against it. A good many changes of dynasty, professor, Nateby has seen; changes of faith; changes in civilization. You may wonder, at the end, whether humanity has made much progress since the first Roman sappers ran up their first stockade on their first mound."

We were in the armoury; and the professor was examining Harry Dennison's service-revolver by the light of an electric lamp.

"If I moralized at all," he murmured, "it would be on the marvellous advance which the art of destruction has made. From the blow-pipe and flint arrow-head to . . . this. We've constructed, too: this electric installation . . . It seems, though, that man always finds it easier to fight out his differences than to settle them. And yet, in the phrase we used ten years ago, half the people who lie buried in the chapel died in a 'war to end war'. They were crusading for Christianity,

which is pacific before anything else; they were fighting for a stable government. . . . I confess that your aboriginal Briton, if he sat in judgement on all the generations that have looked back in contempt on his 'savagery', would not find much to admire in civilization."

As we went in to luncheon, Mrs. Shapland asked me what were the earliest Christian remains at Nateby. I told her that the chapel belonged to the twelfth century and that the Northumberland Archæological Society was divided in opinion over a cross traditionally ascribed to Saint Wilfrid. On this the professor urged me to have the courage of my convictions and to say that, if Nateby had been continuously inhabited since the Roman occupation, it was credible that Christianity had been practised there since the Roman empire turned Christian.

"I find that a stimulating thought!," he exclaimed. "One pictures Nateby then as an outpost of defence, an outpost of civilization, probably an outpost of religion too. I've never been clear in my own mind—it's not my subject—how far Christianity spread in Roman Britain. We know that, nearly two centuries after the evacuation, Augustine had to begin from the beginning, but, when you find a Norman crypt with scraps of Roman tessellated pavement under your good Northumbrian stone, it gives you something to think about. Did anything remain? If not, had the people slipped back into some earlier, wilder belief? What was the faith that the Roman missionaries found?"

We digressed for a time to our conversation of the previous evening and were recalled to the question under debate by Stranger, who murmured:

"Eighteen hundred years? You think the same faith may have been practised here for eighteen hundred years?"

"Say fifteen," the professor suggested. "Constantine made Christianity the official religion in 324. Secret Christians may have strayed over here before that. And it's historically possible that a soldier who heard Saint Peter preach in Rome or even one who helped at the crucifixion might have been drafted to Britain. Anatole France would have written you a wonderful story . . . But I interrupted you . . ."

"I was thinking it over. You yourself said it was a stimulating thought. It is! And yet . . ."

He looked round the table with an air of deprecation, as though he was morbidly fearful of hurting any one's feelings.

"Go on," said Enid.

"Well, to use a colloquialism, would you say that Christianity had 'made good'? A run of nearly two thousand years; and then the late war! I beg your pardon! It is not a subject I ought to discuss; but, as the late war was almost entirely confined to Christian peoples, one feels it was not a good advertisement for Christianity."

He spoke with bitterness rather painfully alien to his usual urbanity. For a time no one answered him; then Mrs. Shapland asked whether it was fair to condemn a religion for the weakness of its followers.

"I was thinking you were hard to please," he laughed with quickly recovered good-humour. "Remember, I was not present at your discussion last night, but it seems that man rejected paganism at one period, because

it was 'not good enough', and that he has been rejecting Christianity ever since, because it is too good."

At the mention of paganism, my thoughts went back to Adela's incomprehensible plea for what she called a "natural life".

"I don't know that we're really hard to please," I said. "We've never had a religion suited to our social requirements. If you tried to live the life of a good pagan in England, you'd very soon find yourself in gaol."

"Where, during the war, you put the only people who tried to live the life of good Christians, the conscientious objectors."

4

WE were talking without regard to the time, I at least with a sense of temporary escape. I did not look forward to my next meeting with Adela. I was trying not to think of Jocelyn Arley. And, so long as we could all talk amicably, I felt no impatience for the others' return nor for a further spell of Mrs. Reid's brisk stage-management. Already, however, the servants were shewing signs of restlessness; and at this moment the butler came in to say that coffee had been taken into the hall. I stood back, as Mrs. Shapland moved towards the door, and waited for Enid to follow. There was a moment's delay as she bent down to pick up her gloves from the floor. I remember asking if the professor would have any more wine and was about to put the same question to Stranger when I saw my wife slide fainting to the

ground. It was the first time since I had known her that such a thing had happened. The professor stretched her flat; Mrs. Shapland sprinkled her face with water; and Stranger brought brandy from the side-board. In a moment the colour flowed back to her cheeks; and, as soon as she came to, I carried her up to her room.

I will admit that I was frightened; but I was even more surprised.

"Were you feeling ill at luncheon?," I asked.

"Never better. Suddenly . . ."

Once again the colour ebbed out of her cheeks; and I thought she would faint in my arms. As soon as I had put her to bed, I rang for a doctor to be summoned, but she countermanded the order.

"I'm all right," she assured me with blue lips. "I've remembered. . . . I had a horrible shock. I was afraid at the time I was going to be sick. I shall be sick now if I think of it. Give me lots of cold water to drink. And talk of something else! What a time the others are taking over their picnic! I'm not sure they didn't choose the better part: a long walk in the fresh air after all those hours in the train . . ."

"You had far too long a walk as it was," I said. "I blame myself more than I can say . . ."

"But I can do fifteen miles without turning a hair! It's the *stuffiness* of this house I can't bear. If that radiator's on, do turn it off! I told you last night that the hall smelt like a menagerie . . ."

While she talked herself into a state of composure, I cast about to discover what possible shock she could have received in an amicable discussion at the end of the quietest meal that I could hope to eat in such a

party. Failing to make even a guess, I took the risk of asking her; and for a moment I thought she was going to faint again.

"I'll tell you later," she promised with a gasp. "If I think of it now, I shall literally be sick. It's so absurd! And so horrible of me! I ought to be feeling sorry for him. Pray *Heaven* he doesn't suspect! Frank, you must be very tactful, even if you have to be very untruthful. Say that fainting is a little weakness of mine! Tell him I've a bad heart . . ."

"Tell who?," I asked.

"Mr. Stranger. We *mustn't* let him think . . ."

In her concern for some one else, Enid had overcome her own feeling of horror. Gripping my wrist with one hand, she covered her eyes with the other. "I'll tell you now. You *must* make it right with him, because it's a little bit your fault: you shouldn't have taken him so far with his poor foot. He was fidgeting the whole way through luncheon; and at the end he had to kick his shoe off. I know, because I felt it. . . . When we were getting up to go, I bent down to pick up my gloves. And I saw it." . . .

"The shoe?"

Enid shuddered and gripped my wrist harder.

"The stump! Darling, he's lost the whole of his foot! The sock was turned back and sewn up like an empty sleeve! It's horrid of me, but I can't *bear* the sight of any deformity. I'd give my last farthing to help any one who was wounded in the war, but I *mustn't* be made to see the wounds. You know I was sent away in disgrace from my hospital? Blood . . . Anything like that . . . *Whatever* happens, poor Mr. Stranger must never know that I saw. You can tell that

he's terribly sensitive . . . And I think he's so charming. How a gentle creature like that can put up with the vulgarity of a man like Lord Escott . . ."

I sat with her, talking of safe subjects, until a chain of lights, winding through the drive, apprised me that the other half of the house-party was returning. After my sleepless night and unsettling day, my head was singing. I knew that some dire suspicion was waiting to attack me; and I could not recall what it was.

I remembered when I stood in the courtyard to welcome the returning cars. The first contained Punch Escott and Jocelyn Arley. In the moment that passed before the lights were turned on, I saw her slipping hurriedly off his knees.

5

WITHOUT waiting for the other cars, I wandered out into the darkness to be by myself.

Some unconscious memory of the path I had trodden so often in boyhood must have guided me towards the Wall; and, if I got no farther than the first of the grass-grown fragments at the bottom of the park, that is because my attention was demanded by what I found going on in its shadow. Let me set down as accurately as I can recollect what took me out of my course, for I was walking along the drive and the Wall lay a full fifty yards to the left.

I was thinking, as every one will guess, of little Jocelyn Arley; young, modest, dainty and exquisite, frank of eye and cool of hand. Until eighteen hours before, she

had never met Punch Escott; and, if she had known him all her life, I should still have expected her to recoil in horror from his blotched face and leering eyes. And yet I had good reason to suspect that this fragrant child had opened her door overnight to an elderly satyr; I had the evidence of my own eyes that she had driven back to Nateby on Punch's knees, caressed by his vile hands, pillowing her head on his practised shoulder.

"After my conversation with Adela," I told myself, "I didn't think I could ever be surprised again. The next thing . . ."

Then I stopped. My impression, as well as I can remember it, is that I saw something moving in the square of silver light between the cubes of masonry and that, thinking nothing of it, I continued on my way. After that, I fancy, I must have heard some unusual sound, for I turned off the road and picked my way across the squelching grass to a stain of shadow where I seemed to discern a body in violent motion. In spite of the moonlight, I could not see clearly and thought at first that two of the moorland ponies, which abounded in the park, were engaged in a friendly tussle. Then an ominous growl pulled me up; and I took firm hold of my stick before going on. I am naturally afraid of dogs; and I stopped again at such a blend of snarl and muffled groan as suggested that a sheep was being worried. At this point, quite clearly, I remember deciding to turn back: I had no wish to separate a ravening dog from its prey; and I had stepped into a flooded rabbit-hole and was wet to the knee. Then, above the snarling, I heard from a voice that brought cold sweat pouring through my skin the words: "You devil!"

For several moments I was completely paralysed. Murder, mutilation or rape might be going on within a stone's throw, but I could not move. As soon as I had recovered control of my legs, I sprang forward, waving my stick and shouting in a way that I suppose was intended to frighten the murderer. It failed to achieve its object. When I reached the scene of the struggle, I saw a tangle of arms and legs; I caught the sound of hard breathing, punctuated at one moment by such a canine growl that I looked for a dog and at another by the rattle which I have heard in a dying man's throat. Which was the assailant, which the victim I could not see: the writhing figures swung and turned like cats at play. The one on top was rolled on his back, the one beneath clawed and bit a way to the top. I saw both figures hanging, as it seemed, in mid-air and then collapsing on their sides, where they lay kicking and grappling. After that one cry, no word was spoken, but both these wild beasts were sobbing with rage and pain.

At such a time one's faculties are a strange confusion of alertness and bemusement. I remember telling myself, clearly and with some relief, that, as these were two men, I need not fear to be bitten; further, that this was a mere attempted murder and not a rape. I should have been in greater difficulties if one of the figures had been a woman, but two men I could belabour impartially. It was here that bemusement came in: I remember shouting like an enraged schoolmaster, waving a stick that neither could see, ordering them—with some queer recollection of the prize-ring—to "break away". Then—my ultimatum delivered—I laid about me with the stick.

For all the good I did I might have been striking the sodden moorland turf. Chance blows from an ash-plant were insignificant when one face was veiled in running blood and the other black in approaching strangulation. I had been hitting at the bodies, but now I aimed at their hands. One pair was groping for its adversary's eyes, the other was tightening about a crowing wind-pipe. I struck and struck again. At ordinary times I am not a weakling, but my blows now would have certainly disabled and probably maimed for life any one who was not insensible to pain and impervious to injury. Once I aimed awry; and my stick crashed down on an unprotected head. I remember saying aloud: "*Now you've killed him!*," but the twisting figures fought on as though I had tickled them with a reed. Their madness by now had infected me; and I hit out at both their heads till my stick snapped in my hand. Then I kicked them, calling wildly for help; and at last, as the back of a head turned to me, I dragged at the collar and, with such strength as I did not know myself to possess, pulled this sobbing, twisting confusion of limbs and trunks to a bog-hole.

"Now," I remember gasping, "*now you've drowned them.*"

At this point my memory is very indistinct. I fancy I must have strained my heart and am conscious of having felt great general weakness and a pain which I could not locate. While the figures in the bog-hole spluttered and struggled, I stood on the edge, drearily and mechanically bleating: "Help!" I made no effort at rescue; I took no thought of escaping before they could combine against me. The grotesque resignation of a dream had possessed

all three of us: they were resigned to the interruption of their fight and seemed to feel that no one could be expected to go on fighting when his lungs were half-full of bog-water; I was resigned to anything that might come. When a voice hailed me in the distance, I felt no surprise; I felt no surprise when Stranger came running from the drive-gate. When he stretched out his stick to the waving hands, now humble and helpless above the black water, I felt no surprise that he exclaimed:

“Colyton! And Helmsley!”

“Who did you think it was?,” I asked.

I remember wondering whether I had explained that Peter had been shell-shocked. I cast about for means of pretending that they had fallen into the bog-hole by accident. I tried to determine what must be done if we were not all to lie at the mercy of a homicidal maniac. Then I stood back as Stranger, one wrist and forearm gripped by four wet hands, straightened himself and swung the two drenched bodies out of the pool. They collapsed, choking and spitting. I recollected telling myself, at our first meeting, that Stranger looked an athlete. Then I waited vaguely for something, anything to happen. . . .

The cloud must have lifted from my brain by the time we drew near to the house. I remember making for a door that the others did not know; and I remember sending Stranger to tell Mrs. Reid that Peter and Keith were rather wet and would come down as soon as they had changed. I remember that we all met in Peter's bathroom and that I collected their clothes outside and gave them to one of the men with a facetious story of Captain Colyton's having taken a short cut across the

moors and launched Mr. Helmsley and himself in an unsuspected pool.

Then I ordered hot whiskey and went back to the bathroom.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE EVENING OF THE SECOND DAY

I

I HAVE been at pains to describe in some detail the fight by the Wall for the reason that it has not been described before. There may have been a reference in court to some "quarrel" or even "brawl", but I was not allowed to give my evidence and Stranger was not in a position to be called. I sometimes wonder if the case would at least have been heard to a conclusion if this curious and vital chapter had not been omitted.

On the whole, I am inclined to think that we should have done more harm than good by basing any great part of our defence on this episode. The plaintiff brings an action for slander; the defendant pleads that the words to which the plaintiff objects are true in fact. The question of malice or of injury is not argued. Counsel for the plaintiff recites the slander and begins to call witnesses. The facts alleged are so preposterous that the jury discontinues the case without calling on counsel for the defence. For the purposes of the action, the result would have been the same if we had all been heard; and some of us would have had a chance to clear ourselves. I am not sure, however, that judge, jury and public

would not have said at the end: "*The plaintiff's case is that this was a houseful of lunatics. The defendant's case is that the lunatics were not lunatics when the party began, though they became lunatics almost immediately. The difference between these two contentions does not affect the indisputable fact that they were lunatics.*"

And against such a presumption I can make no headway. It is useless for me to say, as I am afraid I have already done: "*Look at that group by the fire in the long gallery; does it differ in any way from a hundred similar groups in a hundred similar houses?*"; or "*Listen to the conversation of these men over their cigars at the end of dinner; is it the conversation of madmen?*" A certificate of sanity at one moment was, unfortunately, never a guarantee against the wildest exhibition of insanity at another. My last sight of Peter, before I found him biting and clawing at Keith's throat, was when he came into my room and startled me into thinking him suddenly freed from the black beast that had preyed so long upon his spirit.

2

BOTH men were stripped by the time I returned to the bathroom; and I must go to the prize-ring for a comparison to their state.

Keith was lying spread-eagled on the floor, like a man taking a count; Peter was crouching in a chair, with his head between his hands and his elbows on his knees. I have never seen more complete exhaustion on a human face; and, when they opened their eyes, the dazed expression was less than human. It was I who filled the bath and helped them into it, one after the other; it was I who put a hand at their backs while they gulped neat

whiskey as though it had been water; it was I who wrapped them in towels and helped them to chairs by the fire in Peter's room. There were purple marks round Keith's neck which made him look as if he had been garrotted; Peter's head was bleeding from a spongy, scarlet patch on the scalp, where a tuft of hair had been torn out by the roots; and both their bodies were red and black with angry bruises.

"If you can rub along without calling in a doctor, it will make things a trifle less difficult," I began.

"It'll be an undertaker next time," muttered Keith. "Perhaps," he continued to Peter, "this will teach you to keep away when you're not wanted."

Peter half rose in his chair, then sank back with the smile of one who discovers that the tongue is mightier than the fist.

"I *was* wanted. That's the trouble."

"Say that again . . .," began Keith, but I pushed him back and took up my stand between them.

"No more of this," I barked. "You have me to thank that you're not, one or other of you, waiting to stand your trial for murder. My God!," I burst out. "Grown men, fighting like wild beasts! Were you mad or merely drunk?" There was no answer; and, as I looked from the one to the other, I was afraid. As they sat there, scarred and half-naked, they looked like murderous white apes; if the phrase have any meaning, there was a "blood-lust" in their eyes; and physical exhaustion alone restrained them from indulging it. "We must come to an understanding about this," I continued. "You're a danger to yourselves and to every one else if you're liable to break out like this. Now, look here, Peter, I've never asked you about yourself, but I must now: has this

happened before? You were pretty roughly handled in the war; and I'll make every allowance I can. Have you had any other attacks of this kind?"

There was no answer for some moments; and I realized that my words had no more effect than the blows of my stick. Peter was sitting with his eyes on Keith, like an animal waiting to spring; his teeth were bared like a dog's; and he was beginning to pant again.

I stepped into his line of vision; and he seemed to notice me for the first time.

"Has *what* happened before?" he enquired wearily. "I've *killed* a man before now, if that's what you mean. With my bare hands. I had him round the throat and I could feel him dying. Next time I shall make a better job of it. Next time . . . It was very near! You swine, I could feel everything swelling up and bursting inside you! Another minute! Another minute and you'd have gone limp! A sigh and a shiver as I took my hands away," he gloated. "That'll be all . . . next time. And I shall feel you getting stiff . . . and cold. I shan't leave you till I'm quite sure. Next time . . . Next time . . . If I catch you poaching . . ."

"Poaching?"

I sprang back at the snarl of rage behind me. Keith had risen to his feet and was swaying. He clawed at my shoulder; and I helped him towards his chair, but he suddenly shook his head and nodded brokenly at the door.

"Take me . . . There's good fellow," he whimpered.

And, by the time I had put him to bed, he was crying with the abandonment of a child.

As soon as he was fit to be left, I went back to Peter and found him in a dressing-gown before his fire. The

raw patch on his head had been plastered; and he was making superhuman efforts to recover his self-control.

"I expect you want to know what happened," he jerked out. "Sit down! Have something to smoke! Have a drink! . . . Oh, I was forgetting this wasn't my house. Where was I? Ah . . . Odd business, you're thinking. It is. I only hope it'll be a lesson to that swine! Teach him not to meddle with what isn't his. When a man's married . . . I meant what I said, Frank," he shouted, suddenly losing control of himself: "if I find him fooling round with Adela again, he won't get off so lightly a second time." . . .

So these two had been fighting for possession of Adela Glynde. No shell-shock here; no fit, as I had supposed.

I was too much astounded to follow carefully what Peter was saying. Two men of their breeding and education, two men of the class called "gentle", two former officers of the most honourable and proud regiments of the army, two friends of my own, fighting like savages or wild beasts: I wondered what Stranger thought of them! I wondered what Mrs. Reid would think of English manners! I wondered what story little Miss Arley would carry back to America. And then, in a parenthetic nightmare, I thought of Jocelyn Arley herself, slipping off Punch Escott's knees in the car, of Punch Escott lurking by the door of her room. What would the Shaplands or my wife think of English or American morals? . . . Peter was telling me a vehement story, but I did not need to be told how the quarrel had begun. I had the frank assurance of Adela that she would not have taken Keith if she could have got Peter; she had

discarded the one for the other. And they were ready to commit murder for her. . . .

"God in heaven, are you all mad?," I cried.

"I've never been more sane in my life, thank you," said Peter. "I *have* been pretty mad at times," he continued, staring reflectively into the fire. "The war . . . I saw things in the war—did 'em too—, things a man oughtn't to see. They've been sort of festering inside me. I took to drink in the hope of forgetting. And in the hope of bucking myself up: I had a reputation of being rather amusing in the old days. Thank heavens, that's over: the drink, I mean. I can sleep again now. Last night you saw me just curling myself up. . . . And the war's not going to worry me any more; I told you this morning that we made a great mistake in thinking about it at all. It's *over*. Let the dead bury their dead. . . . I feel quite normal again."

"If your exhibition in the park was a specimen of normal behaviour . . .," I began.

"I should say it was the most natural and normal thing in the world," Peter answered calmly.

"Are you likely to repeat it?"

"That depends on Keith. If he comes poaching . . ."

The manner of studied calm broke down; and I saw Peter's fingers twisting and untwisting, as though they were once more gripped about Keith's throat.

3

It was useless to argue with him in his present mood; and, as I went to my room, I thought only of means to avert blood-shed. My first impulse was to turn the key in Peter's door and to telephone for a doctor and the

police. I realized, however, that, unless he had another outbreak, no one would certify him as insane. At least, if Peter were put in a strait-waistcoat, we should need another for Keith, another for Adela. I did not know where we should stop! Jocelyn Arley was either entirely mad or utterly depraved.

I hesitated on the threshold of my room and went back to Keith. This was a woman's house; and, in the absence of a host, some one must assume responsibility, if not for the good order, at least for the security of the household. Punch, Keith and Peter could be eliminated. The professor was the oldest of us, but he was even less a man of action than myself. And at present he knew nothing of the epidemic madness that had attacked the party. Stranger, I felt, would support me, but he was in some ways more of a recluse than the professor and was handicapped by knowing so little of us. For the present I must assume responsibility single-handed; but at the first possible moment I would lay all the facts before the professor and be guided by his advice. Meanwhile, I must find out whether Keith proposed to dine with us. There should be no scandal, if I could prevent it, and we should have to explain the state of his neck and face. If I could prevent it, there should be no murder. I would ask Keith for his word of honour that he would do nothing to provoke Peter; and, if he refused to give it, one or other of them would have to go.

Keith was still in bed; and my first task was made easy for me when I heard him explaining to his wife and Mrs. Reid that he had slipped into a pool of water and scratched himself in struggling out. They accepted his explanation without demur. Like Peter, he must have made prodigious efforts to recover his normal poise, but I observed

that he was smiling easily enough and shewed no embarrassment when I came into the room. Indeed, he seemed to be making the most of his position, as though in compensation for his recent defeat.

"Tell me what you'd like for dinner; and I'll have it sent right up," said Mrs. Reid.

"But I'm coming down for dinner!," he protested.

"Now don't go do anything so foolish!," Mrs. Reid begged. "You're warm and comfortable here. If I have you on my hands with a chill . . ."

"But it's so dull dining by oneself! If you ordered dinner for *two* and shared it with me . . . Your other guests will spare you for one night if you say you're looking after an invalid. I think it's your duty."

"Well, but see, listen. . . ." Mrs. Reid hesitated; and I fancied that she was torn between her fear of failing as a hostess and her reluctance to place herself in a faintly compromising position. If Keith was afraid of being lonely, Nora was obviously the person to keep him company. "What will this sweet wife of yours say?"

"I wish you joy of him," said Nora, with a yawn. "He's bored with me. . . . Is it time we dressed?"

On my way back to my room I visited Stranger with a vague idea of finding out how much of the fight he had seen. There would be no need, I felt sure, for me to ask him not to mention it, but I hoped I might make the encounter less shameful if I hinted that Peter was subject to seizures and that Keith had been trying to restrain him when the two of them rolled into the bog-hole. I found the room in darkness and was turning to go when a voice called out "Come in!" Stranger was sitting half-dressed

on the sill of an open window, staring out into the December night.

"I came to report that there was no serious damage done," I explained. "Helmsley is keeping warm in bed, but I think Colyton is coming down to dinner."

"Good!," said Stranger. "Those holes are deceptive. If you don't know the country, you're into them before you see them." He turned again to the window. "Isn't it a marvellous night?"

"It's marvellously cold," I answered with a shiver. If he was prepared to believe that Keith and Peter were the victims of an accident, I did not need to invent excuses for them. "I should get pneumonia if I hung out of the window in that state."

"I never take cold," Stranger told me, as he limped to the switches and turned on the lights.

It was too late for me to consult the professor, but in my bath I tried to marshal the facts which I was to put before him. It would be unnecessary to mention Adela's name, but I wanted the support of another man's judgment in deciding what was to be done with Peter. I also wanted to find out whether the Shaplands had stayed before with Mrs. Reid and, if so, whether her parties were usually like this one. Very soon I should be forced to say: "Either I am mad, or every one else is." For the hundredth time in the last twenty hours I was beginning to doubt my own senses. Had I really listened to those amazing avowals from Adela? Had I really seen Keith and Peter baring their teeth and snarling at each other? Had I really flogged them apart?

The handle of my broken ash-plant was in the fireplace of my dressing-room. Seeing it, I once again saw

myself striking, tugging, shouting for help; I saw Stranger bounding across the park to my assistance. For the first time I remembered fragments of our conversation on the way back: he had intended to suggest a walk before dinner, but I had slipped away without giving him the chance. When he found me gone, he had hurried after me. . . .

I paused in bewilderment as a new problem obliterated the old. When Stranger came in answer to my call, there was no sign of a limp: he came running like a boy.

I burst into Enid's room, but she was gone down; and, when I hastened after her, I plunged into the heart of a storm that left me no leisure for my own problems. White-faced and bristling with outraged virtue, Mrs. Reid was explaining that Keith Helmsley had tried to kiss her.

"I've told him to leave the house right now," she added.

Mrs. Shapland murmured something in a tone of shocked sympathy. Punch Escott whispered in Jocelyn Arley's ear and chuckled obscenely. Nora predicted tolerantly that she was sure Keith would apologize when he knew that Mrs. Reid was angry. Adela took me aside to ask if I remembered what she had told me in the night.

I had not imagined our conversation, then.

"What in particular?," I asked, looking in vain for a trace of embarrassment.

It was our first meeting that day; and, try as I might, I could not look her in the eyes.

"I told you it was all talk," Adela replied contemptuously. "She likes to flirt. She likes to pretend that all

sorts of men have been in love with her. She's been throwing herself at Keith's head for as long as I can remember. When he tries to kiss her, she's honestly affronted. That's the real woman. There's not a spark of passion in her. I've always suspected it. Women who are always talking, especially American women who are accustomed to so much sentimental devotion. . . We were discussing 'natural instincts' last night: her instinct is for bourgeois respectability. I don't blame her for that; but the sheep in wolf's clothing is rather tiresome." . . .

4

I DID not expect to derive much pleasure from that night's dinner. It was, therefore, perhaps a compensation arranged by providence that the following two or three hours were the only part of my visit that I can regard in retrospect with the faintest satisfaction. Mrs. Reid, after making a collection of our sympathy, retired tearfully to her room; Keith shewed the consideration to remain discreetly in his; and the rest of us set ourselves to pretend that nothing unusual had happened.

In looking through my diary, I find against this night the entry: "*Our party for dinner reduced by absence of Mrs. R. and Keith. I sat between Mrs. Professor and Jocelyn A. Peter's evening.*" There is nothing more, because there was nothing more to record. There is no outline of our conversation, because there was no conversation. It was "Peter's evening". He talked; we listened. And in posting my journal I must have decided that I could not do justice to his performance. Hearing him, I heard again the Peter Colyton of the days before

the war, when the middle-aged compared him with Oscar Wilde in his prime and the old gravely likened him to Swinburne in his glory.

A tongue of gold and a brain of diamond! He jested and reasoned, quoted and improvised fables. At the end, the cascade of his glittering eloquence turned to music. He hurried to the piano and remained there till midnight. We followed and remained with him.

That, assuredly, is a picture I must not omit. I have hinted at Peter the enchanting dilettante; I have sketched him morose and nerve-wracked; and I have painted him transfigured into a wild beast. Watching him now, I was put in mind of an old master, caked with the dirt of ages and suddenly washed clean. Peter was young again; his dark hair lay in its old disorder; his grey eyes shone in ecstasy. At first the thin hands busied themselves with the theme which he was illustrating; then his head drooped back and his soul played for him. Not the love-music in *Tristan*, not the bridal-song in *Butterfly* has ever torn and shaken me, as I was shaken that night. His playing laid a spell on me and drew my heart out of my body. At the end I discovered Enid's hand in mine, crushed bloodless.

"Making love in music," she whispered.

And I saw Adela stealing forward and crouching, fascinated, on a cushion by his feet. He smiled down on her, as their eyes met; and, when at last—the virtue gone out of him—his hands drooped away from the keys, she caught and pressed them to her lips.

"Peter! Oh, my dear!," she whispered, "I'd forgotten you could play like that!"

"I couldn't," he answered shortly.

"Go on! Go on!," she begged.

He was still playing when the butler came in to take our orders for breakfast, but at the interruption he sprang up and strode into the courtyard, clutching Adela by the wrist. The spell which he had laid upon us grew gradually weaker; and I awoke to my surroundings. Mrs. Reid was not there; and I remembered the cause of her absence. Nora was making excuses for not going to bed; and I chose to fancy that she was undecided whether to treat Keith to a scene in which she would be worsted or to surrender her claims on him without the formality of a protest. The Shaplands were ceremoniously shaking hands and saying good-night to every one; I recollected that I had still to lay my problems before the professor.

"I shall come up later," I told Enid. "Some one ought to stay and see that Punch gets to bed all right. Talking of which," I continued, as though the idea had occurred to me that moment, "the Arley child won't do herself any good by becoming too intimate with him. She doesn't know his reputation as well as we do . . ."

"I should think she can take care of herself," said Enid.

"If I were her mother and heard she was staying in the same house as Punch, I should tell her to lock her door. You might drop her a hint. Punch would be the last man to resent it."

When the Shaplands came to say good-night, I asked if they could spare me a few minutes and led them to the library, where we could rely on not being interrupted. On the way we talked of Peter's playing and of the change that had overtaken him in the last day or two. The change, added Mrs. Shapland, was not confined to

Peter; and from her smile I knew that she was already making a match for Adela. I thought there was no harm in my saying that Peter himself had once aspired to make the same match and that I had long thought it would be his salvation and Adela's.

"Well, the indications . . .," smiled the professor.

"Whether I still think so," I answered, "is another matter. That's one of the things I want to discuss with you. You've not stayed here before, I believe? So you don't know what Mrs. Reid's other parties have been like. Will you tell me candidly what you think of this one?"

The smile, soft-eyed and understanding, which Mrs. Shapland had worn in speaking of Peter, faded at my question. The professor coughed and tried to frame an answer that would satisfy his conscience without reflecting too sternly on any one.

"It is . . . a new experience," he replied with an uneasy laugh. "My wife and I are old people, we go out very little nowadays . . ."

"My dear, you can say what you like to Frank," Mrs. Shapland interrupted. "We *don't* like it. These people are very modern, I daresay . . . What does Enid think?"

"I have not asked her yet," I said. "I wanted the opinion of another man. Something drastic, I feel, will have to be done if we're to avoid a scandal and perhaps something very much worse. To begin with, how much have you seen or heard that struck you as being out of the ordinary?"

The professor puckered his forehead; Mrs. Shapland laid down her knitting. My hint of a scandal or something worse had ruffled their mild composure.

"I'm really not a good witness," he protested. "You'll say my ideas are out of date . . ."

"Not more than mine, if we're to test them by certain standards apparently obtaining here."

The professor filled his pipe and took up his position in front of the fire, where he could command the whole length of the room if any one came in unexpectedly. Looking past the wire-fronted cases to a writing-table at the end, I observed my own despatch-box and was startlingly reminded that I had come to conduct researches into the early-mediaeval history of Nateby. Thorough in small things as in great, Mrs. Reid had caused a typewriter to be set beside the table; and the books in the basket on the floor were no doubt all that could be found to bear on my period. In rather more than twenty-four hours, this was the first time I had found leisure to visit the library; and, with so much else, the object of my research had changed somewhat since the evening before.

"Well, I don't want to criticize our excellent hostess," the professor began, "but I thought it was rather . . . unconventional for her to think of dining alone with one of her guests in his bedroom."

Mrs. Shapland nodded vigorous approval:

"Though that seems very mild now by comparison with what came after."

I felt, though I did not say so, that the whole passage between Keith and Mrs. Reid was very mild by comparison with what had gone before.

"Anything else?," I asked.

"If Miss Arley were *my* daughter—and, after all, Mrs. Reid is responsible for her—," Mrs. Shapland began.

She was, I am sure, about to say that she would not allow her to be seen in Lord Escott's company, but the professor was too fair-minded to admit this in evidence.

"We mustn't bring in personal prejudice," he interposed. "And I have always heard that American girls are given great latitude in choosing their friends . . ."

"Anything else?," I persisted.

I then told the two of them that on the first night of our visit I had seen a man leaving the bedroom of a woman who was not his wife and that the woman had been at no pains to conceal from me the purpose of his call. I told them, without troubling to marshal my evidence, that I suspected another man and another woman of carrying on a similar intrigue. I told them that the first man had been found by me, fighting for his life against a rival. And I invited them to place their own construction on the story that Mrs. Reid had been violently embraced against her will.

"You may think you're in a deserted part of Northumberland," I concluded, "but the life here is that of the jungle."

My poor friends had been watching me with eyes that first lost their customary twinkle, then became round with dismay and finally narrowed in suspicion.

"You really mean . . .?," Mrs. Shapland began.

"You're joking, Frank!," the professor expostulated.

He eyed me shrewdly; and I saw his lips and fingers moving. Plainly as though he were calling the roll, he was enumerating the party and trying to fit names to the parts I had indicated.

"If you'll come with me to-morrow, I can shew you the scene of the struggle," I continued. "If that

doesn't convince you, I shall have to give you names and times. I'm in earnest, professor, and I'm quite sane. As for the others, you can make what you like of them."

"They were all right yesterday," the professor broke in. "When you were kind enough to take us round the castle . . ."

"I only took a few. Your wife, Stranger, my wife and you. *We've* behaved normally. Sane? The atmosphere of the house was so sane yesterday morning that I more than half believed I'd been dreaming. Something's come over the others, though . . ."

"But which . . .?"

"Eliminate! You've known Adela Glynde since she was a child; you've known Peter Colyton in the old days and in the days when he was shell-shocked; you have a pretty good idea what to expect of them. Do you see either of them in the little jungle-setting I've painted for you?"

"I don't," the professor answered simply.

"You're not suggesting that *they* . . .?," Mrs. Shapland gasped.

I had not meant to mention Adela by name, though in her late mood she would have been the first to proclaim it; and I made haste to concentrate my companions' attention on Peter before they had time to forget his reincarnation that night.

"I can shew you the scene of the fight," I said. "Or you can ask Stranger. He was there at the end, when I'd dragged these wild beasts apart, though I don't know how much he saw of the struggle."

"We'll come with pleasure," said Mrs. Shapland. "Peter was one of them?"

"He was. To-night. Six hours ago. You'll come with me to-morrow? And will you be convinced? I'm not asking you to explain anything, I'm asking you to believe that the jungle has invaded Nateby Castle and that we must do something about it. There's a strong minority of sane people, but I give you my word the others are mad, possessed. You don't know what they'll do next. It's a question whether we ought not to go, but I honestly don't like to leave them in their present state."

5

ON my way to bed I realized that I had made a slip in saying that Stranger could corroborate my account of the fight. Unless I was to believe that he was merely being diplomatic, he had seen nothing until he found Keith and Peter struggling to clamber out of the bog-hole. As the Shaplands were coming to inspect the site for themselves, I should not need corroboration; but, in thinking over this trifling inaccuracy, I realized for the first time one difficulty which has become hourly more apparent since I began this statement: for so much of what I affirm I have no independent witness. It was easy to say: "Ask Keith, ask Peter, if you don't believe me"; but, if they had ridiculed my accusations, I had no means of supporting them. I was alone at the moment when Keith came out of Adela's room, alone when I talked to her, alone when I met Punch outside the tapestry-room and alone when I broke in on the fight.

I am not urging this as an apology, but I have been criticized for not having taken either my wife or my hostess into my confidence earlier. I can only say that, when the time came for me to consult them, I had so

much difficulty in getting myself believed that perhaps my reluctance was justified. This very night, when I went upstairs, I met Enid coming out of Jocelyn's room. I could hear them both laughing; and, at the door, Enid blew a kiss and called out "Good-night, darling." My wife is not prodigal of endearments; and I judged that Jocelyn had in some way won her heart. As we went to our room, I was required to hear the praises of some one whom Enid described as "quite the sweetest little girl I've met for a very long time."

What would she have thought if I had told her that she had been sent into Jocelyn's room for the single purpose of keeping Punch out?

"Well, I talked to her," said Enid, as we went to our rooms. "As I told you, she's quite capable of taking care of herself and quite wide-awake about Punch. She said frankly that he only amused her because he was so different from the young men in her own country. More seasoned . . ."

"He's all that," I agreed.

"But I think she's extracted all the amusement he's capable of affording her. She was being pretty short with him when they said good-night. And I shouldn't think a girl like that would amuse Punch for very long. He seemed to be laying himself out to fascinate Nora this evening . . ."

"Nora?"

"Didn't you see them after dinner? Poor Nora! I'm not defending Keith, but a man would have to be dreadfully tired of his wife before it would occur to him to flirt with Mrs. Reid. If you find yourself growing tired of me, Frank, promise you'll only desert me for some one much more attractive!"

As she began to undress, I went to my room and set myself to think over the events of the day before writing my diary. I wondered if I had been precipitate in saying so much to the Shaplands, but I was not prepared to take the responsibility of acting unsupported; and action of some kind would have to be taken.

"We breakfasted in our rooms," I wrote, "and did not meet in force till the evening. Punch, Adela, Miss Arley, Peter and the Helmsleys went on an expedition over the moors to Birby; I took E., Stranger and the Shaplands on a tour of exploration round the castle. Before we split up, Peter came into my room for a chat; and I thought him looking better than at any time since the beginning of the war. I am afraid, however, the improvement is only temporary. I had a long talk with our hostess and am modifying my first, rather hostile opinion of her. She is at heart a simple, homely little woman, whose head has been turned by her suddenly becoming inordinately rich and fancying that her money is best expended in collecting celebrities and notorieties. I wish her no ill; but, if she lost all her money to-morrow, she would very soon be a happier woman and a more useful member of society. She reminds me of a certain mild and generally oppressed member of my college, who announced in the heat of his first bump-supper that he was going to wreck the rooms of his principal persecutor. We enquired later what he had done; and the desperate fellow admitted reluctantly that he had put a hair-brush in his adversary's bed. I do not feel that Mrs. Reid is any more cut out for a life of sins and excesses.

"An upsetting end to luncheon, as E. fainted without warning. I shall probably have something more to say about this later, but it is linked with several other things

that are at present awaiting a more satisfactory explanation than I can give.

"I went for a walk after tea, only waiting long enough to see Miss A. returning with Punch. A reputation for vice exercises a curious fascination over the youthful mind. I told E. to drop Miss A. a hint that she will cheapen herself in the eyes of people who know their Punch if she becomes too friendly with him. The advice was unnecessary, as Miss A., who is a good little girl, though very young, had taken the measure of Punch's foot by now.

"A very bad business in the course of my walk. The only explanation is that Peter had some kind of seizure and went for Keith with intent to kill. K. naturally resisted; and I was only just in time to prevent murder. There was, according to P., the greatest conceivable provocation, but I can say no more about this at present. As though this was not enough for one day, K. must needs make an ass of himself with our hostess, who very injudiciously blazoned the news abroad before carrying her injured feelings to bed. Our party for dinner reduced by absence of Mrs. R. and Keith. I sat between Mrs. Professor and Jocelyn A. Peter's evening. He had made a marvellous recovery, talking at dinner and playing afterwards in the manner of ten years ago. I should like to know, but I tremble to think, what Stranger, who admits he does not go in for house-parties much, thinks of this one."

Reading over what I had written, I took up my pen half-a-dozen times to modify those last two paragraphs. In the end I let them stand. If they did not express what I believed, that is because I could not define what I believed; and at least they expressed what I wanted to believe. I wanted to believe that Jocelyn Arley was all I had thought her at our first meeting, even if she had

committed the insane folly of allowing Punch to come and talk to her in her bedroom. I wanted to believe that Peter had been the victim of a seizure.

Heaven knows! There were plenty of other things I wanted to believe and could not.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SUPERNATURAL LAPSES

I

NEXT morning I met the Shaplands on the battlements and took them along the drive to the Birby gate, turning on to the grass as we drew near the lonely fragments of the Wall. I shall probably be thought weak-minded if I confess that I was more than half afraid of finding nothing and that I rejoiced when I caught sight of the overhung bog-hole. Where the fight had raged, the turf was trampled and scarred. At a distance of thirty feet I found half a broken ash-plant. The professor, exploring the mud of the ring, came upon a coloured waistcoat-button and some wisps of torn grey flannel.

"Was Keith the other one," he enquired; and I saw that he was being convinced against his will.

"Keith and Peter. Fighting like a pair of tigers," I answered. "You could have cut them in two; and they wouldn't have felt it. Possessed, they were."

"That's the second time you've used that word," the professor commented. "Last night . . ."

"It's the only way I can describe them."

He nodded and found himself a seat on a projecting piece of masonry, where he could smoke his pipe out of

the wind. I opened out my shooting-stick for Mrs. Shapland. Neither of them made any comment; and I prepared to take the next step in my argument.

"You accept my story of the fight?," I asked. "Stranger can confirm it. They were fighting about a woman, one of our party. It was not the injured husband thrashing the paramour; the word they both used was 'poaching'. Either of them can confirm that."

Mrs. Shapland sighed and made some reference to Peter's want of balance since the war. Well, I was committed in my diary to the statement that Peter had undergone a seizure, but this failed to explain the behaviour of those who had not lost their balance in the war.

The time for half-confidences was past. I warned the Shaplands to expect a shock and then told them that Adela was the prize for which these madmen had been fighting.

"Both of them will confirm that," he added. "And Adela will confirm that Keith spent half his first night here in her room. That was the 'poaching' which Peter resented. As I've gone so far, I may as well go the whole hog. I suspect that Punch Escott has been becoming much too intimate with Miss Arley . . ."

"Miss . . . Arley?," cried Mrs. Shapland.

"She was sitting on his knees when the car came back yesterday. I suggest nothing more. That I saw. I'm afraid I can't produce any one to corroborate my statement. If you'll tell me whether you believe me. . ."

The professor looked up sharply, then let his chin fall slowly on to his chest.

"It's not a thing one would make up," he groaned.

"Then, if you believe me, we must decide what to do. I wanted to take Enid away yesterday morning, but I didn't like to. When you see a friend drinking himself to death, you can't run away and leave him with a case of brandy. But, on my soul, professor, I'm frightened. Who will be the next to go? Enid? Me? After that Arley child, I wouldn't go bail for any one. They're bewitched."

They looked at me, silently and with grey faces. When neither spoke, I asked whether I was not justified in using the word "possessed".

"Herd-hypnotism?," the professor hazarded. "I'm doubtful. It's not my subject, but I believe that hypnotic power can only work in directions approved by the patient. You might cure a drunkard who wanted to be cured; you would never make a drunkard of one who instinctively resisted. Herd-hypnotism might encourage you along a road to which you were already predisposed, but that would be all. And, anyway, who would 'bewitch' them? . . . If you're prepared to say that a child like Miss Arley . . ."

"They were all saying how tired they were of inhibitions and conventions," I reminded him.

"It looks almost as though they'd been taken at their word," murmured Mrs. Shapland.

The professor knocked out his pipe and filled it again deliberately.

"Arcady!," he sighed, pointing with the stem of his pipe to the trampled ground between us. "And it proves to be nearer to our conception than theirs. If you ask me to explain . . ."

He shrugged his shoulders and tucked his head under the cape of his ulster while he lighted his pipe.

"When you say 'taken at their word'?", I pressed Mrs. Shapland.

Though I had never discussed theology with her, I should have been surprised to find her wholly free from the gloomy preoccupations of her race. I watched to see whether she was regarding this darkness that had descended on the minds of our companions as a judgement from heaven on the levity of blasphemers.

Puffs of blue smoke wavered at the edge of the ulster; and the professor revealed a flushed face.

"She didn't mean it literally," he protested on his wife's behalf.

"The way it's worked out . . .," Mrs. Shapland began, then stopped with a frown.

I wondered whether she was trying to recall how the "ayes" and "noes" had been cast when Peter put his motion of "no-confidence" to the vote. The Shaplands, Enid and I had been in a minority; we were also, for the present at least, in our right minds. Of the others, Adela and Miss Arley, Keith and Peter had voted for untrammelled nature; and, as Mrs. Shapland hinted, they had been "taken at their word". At this point, however, any theory of contagious hysteria or herd-hypnotism broke down: Mrs. Reid and Nora, who had sided with the majority, were still refreshingly sane; on the other hand, Punch Escott, who seemed to have reverted to "nature" as soon as any one, was not present when the vote was taken.

"You don't mean it literally?", I urged Mrs. Shapland.

"That they were 'taken at their word'?", she asked; and, without answering, her lips closed in a straight line.

The professor shook his head sorrowfully at such superstition:

"That's like telling children that, if the wind changes when they're squinting, their eyes will remain fixed: To be candid," he continued to me, "I thought several people that night had dined very well. A long journey, the first night of the party . . . If they *believed* what they were saying . . ."

"Which they didn't!", I objected.

"If they felt they really wanted to knock off all the fetters . . .," he went on, more to himself than to me. "Well, it's a small thing, but Peter was tired and he curled up in a chair before all of us. He said he was following his natural instinct or something of the kind. If the others did that, each in his own way, if there was what a German (I suppose) would call a 'will to nature' . . . One begins to speculate whether they have not taken *themselves* at their own word."

2

As the professor seemed to be awaiting criticism, I pointed out that his explanation rested on the assumption that normal controls had been relaxed by fatigue and weakened by indulgence. The assumption, however, went too far in one direction and not far enough in another: Adela and Jocelyn had drunk nothing but water; and the "will to nature" had continued and was continuing still when the normal control should have been re-established by rest and abstinence.

We sat staring at one another until Mrs. Shapland startled me by saying:

"You used the word 'possessed', Frank."

"Which, in my turn, I didn't mean to be taken literally," I answered.

"I disliked a good deal of the conversation that night," she continued sturdily. "Perhaps I'm too much afraid of being thought narrow-minded and old-fashioned, but when young people talk about votes of confidence in God . . . You may have observed that I went to bed early."

"But you don't believe this is a visitation?," I asked.

"I do not believe that God would be so small-minded! It would serve them right, though, if they had been overheard. When you said they were 'possessed', you seemed to mean that a devil had entered in. As indeed he might. As indeed they *asked* him to. As indeed, from all you tell us . . ."

She would not finish her sentence. Indeed, looking back on our conversation that day, I find that all three of us put forward theories which we were unwilling to defend. To judge by her expression, I believe that, if Mrs. Shapland had said all that was in her mind, she would have confessed that the devil, ever on the lookout for his own, had come when his name was called.

The professor was pinching his beard and drawing rapidly at his pipe. He at least, from a single gesture of faint impatience, did not believe in thin-skinned gods or watchful, prowling devils; and, when he spoke again, I found that he had ceased to look for an explanation.

"We've wandered away from the original question," he reminded us. "What are we to do? I think Mrs. Reid should be told what's going on. The others are old enough to know what they're about, but if anything happened to that little girl . . . It's dreadful to think of! If what you say is true, I don't want to stay another hour in the house. Run over the facts again! The first episode in this appalling business was when you saw

Keith coming out of Adela's room. You hadn't noticed anything abnormal about her before? Or about Keith? You've been very objective so far. Can't you bring yourself in a little? Do you recall any particular moment when you would have said that people were losing their heads? Had you any warning?"

From his tone I knew that the professor suspected me of withholding some part of the truth. And, if the wildest fancies and wonderings were relevant to our enquiry, I suppose I was. Thinking of that first night, I had begun to play with a conceit which I should have asked no one to treat seriously. Unlike Mrs. Shapland, I was neither shocked nor hurt by anything that was said that first evening, but I was very considerably bored. At the time and afterwards I had been deeply impressed by the professor's hypothesis—new to me—that, when nature-worship became—in an ascetic world—devil-worship, the attributes of Pan were given to the devil: I recalled his description of the pagan world, making its last resistance, so vividly that I was able to reproduce whole pages of it in my diary. So long as he talked, we were hearing a scholar on holiday. What I found hard to bear was the crudity of the discussion that followed, with first one and then another holding the scales and putting the question in a contrast between two rival systems of combined ethics, theology and civilization, which he was equally incapable of understanding. I do not advertise myself as a Christian or a pagan, but I realized that paganism and Christianity were both conceptions too big for the superficial intelligences that were presuming to judge between them. I remembered wishing that Punch Escott would come to create a diversion. I remembered trying to concentrate my attention

on the faces and frocks, on the lights and shades of the room, in the hope of escaping this inane chatter. I remember, as I have set down before, the uncanny appearance of the group round the snapdragon table, with the glancing blue fire illuminating the arms of women who had no bodies and the bodies of men who had no arms. I remembered being reminded of *The Invisible Man*, in an old, illustrated edition, where the Man is represented as a mobile suit of clothes.

I remembered the voting. I remembered thinking: "If these people were superstitious, they'd realize they were playing a dangerous game: voting Christ out and Pan in." I remembered a voice—I thought at the time it was an uneasy voice, but that may have been imagination—saying "Is the house on fire?" I remembered that the blue light died blindingly to extinction and was instantly followed by a glare of white, symbolically, as though we had in fact changed one god for another. I remembered groping for the switches. I suppose I shall be mocked if I say that, as the great doors were flung open, I should hardly have been surprised to hear a voice saying, like a *djin* from his bottle: "*You have summoned me. I am come. Pan is my name.*" I should in fact have been surprised out of my life; I only mean that, as Mrs. Shapland might have said, it would have served these others right to be taken at their word.

It is a matter of indifference to me if these fancies seem extravagant. They had passed through my brain two nights before; they came back when the professor asked me to describe my own sensations at a time when certain of our companions, by "visitation" or "possession", by "autosuggestion" or "contagious hysteria"

were changing their identity. Had I noticed a difference of atmosphere?, he enquired. Was I given any warning?

Throughout our later conversation that night, one after another of us had spoken as though it were possible for men and women, dowered with free-will, to surrender themselves and change their allegiance like voters in an election. Since that night, first one and then another had behaved as though the new allegiance had been offered and accepted.

"Do you remember the vote that was taken?," I asked. "Christ or Pan. Do you remember if anything unusual happened at that time?"

Mrs. Shapland made a wordless, unreproducible noise of disapproval.

"What *did* happen?," the professor asked without committing himself.

"Nothing that I know of. It was an amazingly fine stage-effect, that's all. Question put; one god dethroned; another acclaimed; lights off, lights on." I quoted the words of my imaginary *djin*: "'You have summoned me. I am come. Pan is my name.' You didn't see the butler's gesture in throwing the doors open . . ."

Mrs. Shapland looked pained, as though frivolity was out of place at such a time. The professor smiled indulgently.

"And which was Pan?," he asked. "I mustn't be malicious, but Lord Escott always reminds me strongly of Silenus."

"A most suitable escort," I suggested. "Well, that's my general impression of the evening. A change of atmosphere . . .?"

"You don't *really* mean . . .?," Mrs. Shapland began.

"No!," I said.

"I must say that Lord Escott . . .," she persisted, half to herself.

"Is . . . unwholesome?," I prompted her. "I agree. You wouldn't suggest, though, that his mere presence had such a power of contamination . . .? You certainly wouldn't say that he'd been sent as a divine scourge . . .? I mean, I was at Eton with the fellow, I've known him all my life. There's nothing supernatural about him."

Mrs. Shapland prepared a reply and then thought better of it. I imagine she was going to say that the workings of providence were inscrutable and that, if a blasphemer had to be punished, no one was impossible as an instrument of punishment.

The professor sighed deeply and stood up.

"We could look for explanations all day," he decided.

"Meanwhile, the facts we're trying to explain . . . I think the first thing is to tell Mrs. Reid . . . What's the matter? Have you discovered more trophies of the fight?"

I had thrown away my cigarette and was putting my heel on it when I observed something on the ground that caused my heart to miss a beat. Before the professor could join me, I had hacked the soft earth into mud; and I believe I explained lamely that I was only burying a cigarette-end.

I do not know whether my voice betrayed me, but both the Shaplands looked at me in surprise. I tried to speak, though I do not remember what I wanted to say; and suddenly I found sweat pouring down my forehead and into my eyes. I have an idea that I pointed wildly to the ground and bade them look; certainly I have a recollection of two bent backs and two pairs of eyes

exploring the mud at my feet. It was the professor, I think, who whispered: "He's ill. Run to the lodge." I remember crying inconsequently: "No, I'll go!" Then there followed a moment of confusion in which I felt hands on my arms and wrists. I forget whether I struggled, but after an eternity I heard my own voice saying from a distance that I was all right.

"Let's go back," I added, sinking down on the stone where the professor had been sitting. "This infernal influenza . . . I've had a temperature ever since I've been here."

The professor stood over me, patting my shoulder. When I was recovered, he helped me to my feet and slipped his arm under mine.

"Now, look here," he began, with a squeeze. "I'm nearly old enough to be your father and quite old enough to be your Dutch uncle. I'm going to talk to you as such. You've not been well; and this business has got on your nerves. No wonder your temperature goes up . . ."

"I know all that," I interrupted.

"We don't want *you* to go off your head! You're getting jumpy . . ."

"And with reason! I'm not accustomed . . ."

"To what?"

"To the things I'm meeting here." I was sweating and trembling like a frightened horse; and I caught the professor nodding significantly to his wife. For some reason, that infuriated me; and I stood up with a non-chalance which I was far from feeling. "I've convinced you about the fight," I boasted. "And the other things. Don't be in a hurry to say I'm mad. I may

have to convince you of something far stranger. As a matter of personal vanity, do I *look* mad?"

"You look . . . excited," the professor had to admit.

"That first night," I said, "I was standing with Adela, looking at the moon. You remember how we'd been talking? She said something to the effect that it wouldn't take much to make her believe in Pan . . ."

"Oh, *Pan* !," he exclaimed impatiently.

"Yes, Pan."

"So long as she doesn't go beyond the stage of *almost* believing in him . . . ,"

"There's hope for her? I'm afraid there's no hope for me, then, on that reckoning. I believe in him. I believe in him as implicitly as I believe that the three of us are walking along this road . . ."

"He's certainly a very engaging creature to believe in," said the professor, with the manner of one who has been warned not to excite the patient by contradicting him.

3

WE spoke little on our way back to the house. I made a last careful inspection of the trampled ground and then despatched the Shaplands the way we had come, while I—for purposes of my own—took a short cut and met them halfway up the drive. For purposes of my own I also collected a handful of sticks and marked the track. The professor eyed me with unhappy concern, but so long as I could trust my own reason I did not care what strain my reason had to support. And every yard that I walked gave me new evidence to support that which I had seen and obliterated with my foot in the muddy

ring by the Wall. I was tranquil and confident by the time that the Shaplands joined me, puzzling only to capture some lines that kept eluding me.

'*You'll say, once all believed . . .*' How did it go on?

'*Man, woman, child*' . . .

I asked the professor.

" '*You'll say, once all believed, man, woman, child* ', " he answered.

" '*In that dear middle-age these noodles praise.*

'*How you'd exult if I could put you back . . .*' "

" '*And set you square with Genesis again—*' , " I continued,

" '*When such a traveller told you his last news,*

'*He saw the ark a-top of Ararat*

'*But did not climb there since 'twas getting dusk*

'*And robber-bands infest the mountain's foot !*

'*How should you feel, I ask, in such an age,*

'*How act ?*' " . . .

" What bearing has this . . . ? , " asked the professor.

I repeated Browning's question:

" How *would* you feel, professor, if you saw happening any of the things that people have believed for thousands of years, but which you personally don't believe? If you saw one holy man smiting a rock and causing water to gush out? If you saw another being borne away in a chariot of fire? If the ass you were riding turned and rebuked you? "

Mrs. Shapland murmured that a great many things in the old testament had to be interpreted allegorically.

" I should suspend judgement until I found two or three people who had had the same experience, " the professor answered cautiously.

"You wouldn't reject the ark because you've been taught to believe that the ark-story is a piece of folklore? I'm glad of that."

"I don't say I shouldn't be rather surprised."

"Quite so! And, to return to Pan, you'd be surprised to hear his pipes or to see him running out from among the trees yonder. But if you *saw* him, if several of us had the same experience" . . .

"We must hurry up," the professor broke in, "or we shall be late for luncheon."

We reached the house in time to find an altercation breaking out and the house-party dividing into equal and equally acrimonious factions. The ball of which our hostess had warned us was to take place, it appeared, on the evening of this, the third, day. I am afraid I had forgotten all about it in the press of other matters. So, I fancy, had every one else. And we were first reminded when the butler, after announcing luncheon, asked Mrs. Reid what time she wished dinner to be served that night.

"A ball? Oh, hell!," said Peter, when his fate was made known to him.

"Is it to-night?," asked Mrs. Shapland. "How delightful!"

If they had been practising all the morning they could not have synchronized their criticism more accurately nor expressed a wider divergence of feeling. Before long, indeed, I was reminded of a childhood's game in which two leaders were appointed to "pick up sides". Every one had something to say; every one said it with emphasis, encouraged thereto by Mrs. Reid, who wished to know how each of us felt and talked unpractically of putting off the dance if we "sweet things" did not want

it. I saw at once that feeling, for some reason, would run high. I should have thought, indeed, that, as no one could be compelled to take part, the castle was commodious enough to provide sanctuary for all, but the school in antagonism to the ball not only declined itself to take part but tried to constrain every one else.

"Whatever made you do that?," Punch Escott growled to Mrs. Reid on the heels of Peter's audible expletive.

"Does *any one* . . .?," began Keith, in apparent forgetfulness that he was under sentence.

"What a dreadful idea!," sighed Nora. "Can't you put these people off?"

The professor and I looked at each other in amazement. Mrs. Reid was in some measure to blame for organizing her party to excess at one moment and leaving it to take care of itself at another. There was a difference, however, between encouraging her guests to amuse themselves in their own way and allowing them to dictate whether she was to invite her own neighbours to her own house. In the early stages of the wrangle I listened without taking part; but, when our hostess talked seriously of putting off a hundred people at a moment's notice, I felt it was time for me to warn her that this was not the most obvious way of endearing oneself to the county. We reasoned with the mutineers and ultimately brought them into line. I cannot say that they yielded with a good grace, though they behaved rationally enough when the evening came; and I added this curious explosion of ill-humour to the lengthening list of eccentricities which I could not explain.

"It will keep them out of mischief, at any rate," I observed to the professor.

"Perhaps . . ." he began with a shrug. Then, I thought, he looked at me suspiciously again. "If you have a temperature, you ought to be in bed."

"I'm going up now. Perhaps that's why they resent it, you were going to say?," I asked. "The jungle has spoiled their taste for civilization?"

He shrugged without answering.

After her fainting-fit of the afternoon before, my wife was spending the day in her room; and I obtained Mrs. Reid's permission to lunch upstairs. For reasons of my own, I did not wish to meet the others at present; and it was more than time for me to ask my wife, as I had asked the professor, whether she had noticed anything unusual in the two days that we had been at Nateby.

"Mrs. Reid is rather worse than I feared; and Peter is better than I expected," Enid answered. "I believe he's really trying to pull himself together. . . . Is that the sort of thing you mean?"

"I want all your impressions," I told her.

"Well. . . . I think it does Adela good to be taken out of herself and shaken up in a party like this. She's much more human. I confess I was rather shocked by Keith last night, but I think our excellent hostess was a fool to talk about it. . . . Must I go through the entire list? Punch? Well . . . The Shaplands? You know I adore them. And I must tell you I've rather lost my heart to poor Mr. Stranger."

"Tell me what you think of him," I urged. "And then I'll tell you something that will surprise you."

Enid wrinkled her forehead for a moment; then her black eyes softened compassionately:

"I'm *sorry* for him. He seems so much out of things. You don't know where Punch came across him? Or

how he was wounded? He's such a mild, wistful creature among all these roughs. When I look at him, I always think of a gazelle surrounded by noisy children . . . "

"Your mind is still running on the menagerie-idea," I said.

"Is it? I'm sorry . . . "

"It's very apposite. I see Stranger has made a certain impression on you. Would you say he had influenced any one else? Would you say that, from the moment he arrived, the entire atmosphere of the house changed?"

Enid made a wry face and sniffed a scented handkerchief:

"The less said about the atmosphere, the better! It's not my imagination, Frank: there's a most *unpleasant* smell sometimes. An animal smell. The others must be noticing it too. Otherwise I can't explain their sudden passion for fresh air."

"Stranger and I agreed to call it 'communing with nature'," I said.

Enid sniffed again:

"I expect we mean the same thing."

"I wonder!"

She looked at me in surprise and then pointed to a chair beside the bed.

"Is anything the matter?," she asked. "You look worried."

"I'm puzzled," I had to confess. "Shapland fancies I'm mad . . . No, he'd *like* to believe that, but he half thinks as I do. Yes, I *am* worried. The question is whether or no I'm out of my mind. You have to decide."

WITHOUT giving names, I hinted at what I had told the professor. Then I sketched our discussion that first night after dinner, when Enid was absent at the piano. She had heard nothing of it at all and had observed nothing unusual about Punch Escott's entry with Stranger except that the room, outside a circle of candle-light by the piano, was in darkness at the time. I had to make my tone deliberately fantastic before venturing on the conceit which I had advanced to the professor.

"If you didn't hear the conversation," I ended, "you may not see the point. That vote of confidence in Pan, the sudden darkness, the sudden light, the opening of the doors, the arrival of the unknown. '*You have summoned me*,'" I declaimed sepulchrally. "'*I am here. Stranger or The Stranger: it does not matter what you call me . . .*'"

"How absurd you are!," Enid laughed.

Though she affected to be amused, I fancied that the laugh was uneasy. I was no doubt looking excited; and she was disturbed to find me working myself up over something that must have seemed childish to her.

"A mad idea? That's what the professor thinks," I said. "I'll defer to your considered opinion, when you give it. I warn you, though, that, if I'm not mad, several people are. There's an atmosphere of madness in the house. And I go so far as to say that the atmosphere changed at the moment when the doors were so dramatically thrown open."

On that word I told her of the discoveries that had been forced upon me since the first night. I gave the

names. I described the fight by the Wall. I asked her if this was the normal behaviour of sane people. At first, like the Shaplands, Enid would not believe me. Then I could see that she was half-convinced. As I went on, however, in growing excitement, I saw doubt dawning.

"This is all true?," she asked. "You think you saw . . . and heard . . . ?"

Too much on edge to sit still, I jumped up and paced the room, flinging my jerky sentences at her over the one shoulder or the other.

"*Think?*," I echoed. "*I know!* . . . And I've not told you a quarter of it. . . . Those are the salient facts. . . . You may say that half the party has reverted to nature, the jungle-life. . . . It's an interesting coincidence that you and the Shaplands and I have not been affected. We cast doubts on the blessings of wild nature. . . . I don't ask you to believe anything that can't be substantiated. We know Punch and the way he always behaves; we know nothing of Miss Arley, who seems to be one person when she talks to us and another when she sits on Punch's knee. Leave them out and concentrate on Adela, whom we both know. Get her to tell you what she told me that night. . . . And concentrate on the meeting yesterday between Peter and Keith. That can't be challenged. I broke my ash-plant over Keith's head, Stranger must have seen me pulling them apart, I took the professor to examine the marks . . ."

I stopped before telling her my greatest discovery of all, which would rule out Stranger from my panel of witnesses.

Enid was staring at me in bewilderment, her luncheon untasted on the tray by her bed. She was no longer

incredulous, but instead of doubting me I thought she was beginning to doubt herself.

"I take your word for the facts," she sighed at last, "though I wouldn't have believed any one else. *Adela!* . . . After this, I feel I shall never be suprised again. I suppose one *could* explain it. She's been trying so long to make herself utterly inhuman; the effort was too much and this is the reaction. I think I can understand that. The rest is quite simple. Keith and Peter were both in love with her; poor Peter has never been quite the same since the war. . . . I understand it, but I *can't* believe it," she ended inconsequently.

"You *must* believe the facts," I said. "And you think they can be explained more or less rationally?"

"Why, yes! If I didn't . . . Frank, you don't *seriously* believe . . ."

I came to anchor by the bed and looked her steadily in the eyes:

"What *I* believe doesn't matter. I want to try certain facts and certain hypotheses on a fresh mind. I have my own theory, at which I've only hinted. If I proclaimed it starkly, you'd say I was raving. And yet . . . I won't admit I'm raving till you or the professor shew me that you don't admit even the possibility . . . He hedges. *You* hedge. You won't say bluntly . . ."

"What d'you want me to say?," she interrupted.

I could not answer. I did not know whether I wanted my "ravings" shared or cured. I was glad to have unburdened myself so far; but I could not sleep again until some one had explained that which I alone had seen in the mud by the Wall. I watched Enid as she began her meal. Her movements were calm; her manner was reassuring.

"Mine is the explanation," she declared. "The only explanation. Unless you want me to believe that poor Mr. Stranger . . ."

"I want you to tell me all you can about poor Mr. Stranger. He's an odd fellow. One reason why I'm not lunching downstairs is that I don't want to meet him at present. Now, there was a very upsetting incident yesterday . . ."

Enid's face whitened.

"Oh, poor man! Don't let's talk about that."

"We must, sooner or later. I promised to tell you something curious about him; and here it is. When I was trying to separate those two last night, I called out for help; and Stranger came running across the park. I was too much excited to think of it at the time, but afterwards it occurred to me as curious that a lame man could run like that. He must have taken off his shoe . . ."

"I think he has to, when the pain is more than he can bear. You remember after luncheon yesterday . . ."

"I didn't notice that either," I continued; "but, when I was shewing the scene of the fight to the professor, I noticed some curious marks. They were just by where I'd been standing; and they went back to the place where Stranger had cut across from the drive. I walked back that way this morning. There's no doubt at all. One was an ordinary shoe-print; the other . . . well, the other *wasn't* an ordinary shoe-print! It wasn't an ordinary foot-print, it wasn't even the print of a foot that had been most mercilessly hacked about. It was . . . I don't know what it was! The ground was soft, no doubt he was wearing a sock . . ."

By now Enid was sitting upright, pearly-white, with blazing eyes. Only once have I seen that look in any eyes; and they were the eyes of a favourite hunter that I tried to rescue when my father's stables were on fire. They represented desperate fear battling with desperate incredulity.

"What d'you *think* it was?," she burst out.

"What did you see yesterday?," I threw back.

5

THERE was no need for me to put my ghastly suspicion into words. Enid was become so white that I feared she was going to faint; and I remember, to my shame, hardly caring whether she fainted or not so long as she believed what I believed. Yes, I now admitted to myself for the first time that I believed something which would cause the professor—aye, and a million men out of a million and one—to certify me a lunatic.

"But . . . they don't exist," Enid whispered. I refrained from asking what did not exist. "Poor Mr. Stranger . . ."

"'Poor Mr. Stranger' is entirely charming!" I was shouting, but I could not control my voice. "With the exception of the professor, I should call him the one gentleman of the party. He can afford to be. He's aloof, like a god. He is superior to the passions he inspires. As a god should be . . .," I added in derision. "He is a melancholy, romantic creature; mysterious and lovable. We stand in no danger from him, we never welcomed him to this house; and he's too well-bred to force his attentions where they are not wanted. I daresay he knows all we're saying about him at this

moment, but I'm not afraid. 'Poor Mr. Stranger' . . . ! Will you explain to me, Enid, why sane people went mad at the moment when 'poor Mr. Stranger' entered this house? Will you explain why every room bears an animal scent when he's passed through it? Will you explain how this cripple can run like a man or bound like a goat when his foot has shed its human covering? Enid . . . Enid, what did you see before you fainted yesterday?"

With a shudder she fell back with twitching lips; but, so long as she could speak, I had to press for my answer.

"I saw nothing!" she gasped. "I swear! It was the deformity . . . A foot stopping short just beyond the ankle-bones. Horrible! You know how that sort of thing . . . I should faint if a man pulled off his glove and shewed me that his hand had been cut off at the wrist. What did *you* see? The marks on the ground?"

What *had* I seen? I weighed my answer as though our lives depended on it.

"I thought . . . one of the ponies . . . had come that way," I answered, finding my mouth suddenly dry.

Enid clapped her hands in hysterical relief:

"It *had*! Obviously!"

"It had hopped on one leg, then."

"You didn't see the other marks!"

"There *were* no other marks . . . like *that*. And, wherever I saw that mark, it was accompanied—walking or standing—by a man's shoe. I admit the outline was smudged: he was wearing a sock, the ground was soft . . ."

"So that you really can't judge from that!," Enid broke in with a gesture of entreaty.

"A pony's hoof is not cloven," I reminded her.

Enid buried her face in her hands and began to cry.

I tried to comfort her, but she shook me off. I walked to the fire and tried to warm my hands, which were like lumps of ice. My head, however, was ablaze; and I crossed to a chair at the far end of the room. It was near the writing-table, I remember; and I stared for some time at a framed calendar. December? Of course it was December; and in England, though this room was hot enough for midsummer in the tropics. And 1924? I supposed so. Sceptic though I called myself, I knew that the vast majority of the world still believed in phenomena that were outside the normal and ascertained workings of natural laws; rational men still gave credence to this statement or that, which was unsupported by evidence or opposed to it. My hard-headed solicitor thought that the number thirteen was ill-omened; my broker kept a black cat "to bring him luck"; both told me that they had seen ghosts.

Nineteen hundred and twenty-four: a century since Goethe and Faust. How much did Goethe believe the age-old stories of traffic between man and devil? How much did Enid? Or the professor? Nothing at all! Then how much did they believe stories of pacts between men and gods? Did Enid believe there had been a Faustian bargain between Abraham and Jehovah, whereby in return for faithful service the creator and ruler of the universe promised that his servant should be the father of many nations? If man could make a pact with one god, as millions believed even in December, 1924, could he not make pacts with every god that human

imagination had ever fashioned? For myself, three hours before, I should have said that I did not believe in the existence of Pan; but I did not believe in the existence of Jehovah. The last chronicles of Nateby were no more incredible to me than the first chapters of Genesis. Jehovah was still fashionable in some quarters, whereas Pan was outmoded. Assuredly I did not believe in Pan, but Enid and I were in the same house as a creature who had set her faith and my scepticism rocking. And the season was December, in the year one thousand nine hundred and twenty-four.

I stood up and walked to the door.

"You mustn't leave me!", Enid cried in terror.

"*You* won't come to any harm," I assured her, "but I'll stay if you like. I wanted to let the professor know."

"What are you going to tell him?"

It was in my mind to say that I wanted to convince him of my sanity, but this seemed both arrogant and premature.

"I want to see if he has any explanation," I answered. "He admits that some of the people here are behaving very oddly. He talked this morning about auto-suggestion, as though sane women and men who happened to say they'd like to live a perfectly natural life could thereupon hypnotize themselves into leading a kind of jungle-life without a moment of hesitation or surprise. I admit, when I thought of Adela's cold-blooded explanations the other night, I was prepared to accept his theory within limits. I hadn't seen . . . the mark then."

We ate our luncheon in silence; and at the end I telephoned in Enid's name and asked the professor to come and see her before he retired to work. He arrived

in company with his wife; and I told them both to prepare for a greater shock than any they had yet experienced.

"I don't ask you to explain anything," I said. "I don't ask you to believe anything. What I'm going to tell you can be as well substantiated—and in the same way—as yesterday's fight, which you were very properly loath to accept until you had seen the circumstantial evidence of it. There was one thing I didn't tell you at the time, but you'll remember I received rather a shock from something I saw on the ground where Stranger had been standing the day before. I'll tell you what that was, but first I must remind you that Enid had rather a shock after luncheon yesterday from something she saw on the ground where Stranger was sitting. He had taken off his shoe. He took it off again when he came to my assistance. He is not lame, by the way, because he came to me running. He limps when he is wearing a shoe, because he is not accustomed to it."

"Not accustomed?," the professor echoed.

"He has one cloven hoof, you see." . . .

CHAPTER NINE

THE EVENING OF THE THIRD DAY

I

A CLOVEN hoof. . . .

I had said it. And I was to meet the creature that night at dinner! As I came back to the house before luncheon, I was plotting to avoid a meeting, but I had not looked more than an hour ahead. Was I afraid? Did I feel that to be in the same house as the Stranger was like being locked in a room with a ghost? I cannot analyse my feelings; I am by no means sure that they were sharply defined. As I stood by the Wall, with sweat streaming down my face, I felt that I stood in the presence of the supernatural. My questions to the professor on our way back indicate the trend of my thoughts more clearly than I can recollect them: I was practising a mental attitude to assume on discovering that the bounds of what I called "nature" had been enlarged.

Once I was myself convinced, I had to convince the others; and, while they struggled helplessly to maintain their unbelief, I detached myself rather callously and used my discovery to explain the riddles which had

hitherto baffled me. Admit the existence of a nature-spirit, I said, and a certain course of conduct may be expected of all who follow the nature-cult. It was "natural" for Adela to assuage the yearnings which she had been repressing for so long; it was "natural" for Jocelyn Arley to gratify the curiosities that were doubtless, at her age, beginning to disturb her. It was "natural" for Mrs. Reid, if she was "naturally" passionless, to abandon the pretence of passion. And, if Nora Helmsley, too, were passionless, I need not be surprised that she shewed no change.

The rule of nature: I remembered turning the phrase over on that first night of all and wondering in what respects my life would be modified if I followed my natural instincts. The desire for food and warmth, I suppose, is stronger than the desire for any other enjoyment; the desire to avoid pain and death comes slightly before the desire to maintain life by food and warmth. These fundamentals, however, were secured to me already; and I concluded that the "natural life" which we discussed that night would give me nothing more than a licence to eat and sleep when I desired instead of by an arbitrary time-table and the privilege of mating promiscuously with any female that took my fancy. My forecast was fairly accurate. From the lips of Peter Colyton I had heard that it was "natural" for a man to curl up like a dog when he was tired; from his new practice I judged that it was not "natural" for a man alternately to soothe himself with tobacco and to stimulate himself with alcohol. It was "natural", when two males desired the same female, that they should fight for her to the death; "natural" that men and women with a foot and a half already in the kingdom of nature should resent

being dragged back to wear sophisticated clothes and dance to conventional music.

"And do you believe this, my dear?"

At the sound of the sober Scottish voice, I came out of my reverie and found Mrs. Shapland sitting beside the bed, holding Enid's hand between her own.

"I've not seen the marks . . . , " Enid fenced.

"If you had? I take them for granted. You would not believe that a heathen god, an animal dressed in man's clothes . . . "

Before we pitted the orthodox deities against the unorthodox, I felt that we must decide whether—in the phrase I had just coined—the bounds of nature had been enlarged. Did Mrs. Shapland take Stranger for granted?

"Don't *you?*," she retorted. "I sat next to him at luncheon . . . "

Then it was I realized that I should have to meet the creature at dinner.

"Do you believe," I asked in my turn, "that people can be possessed?"

"We are expressly told so in the Bible. People and animals. How far the language may be figurative . . . "

"Then do you believe," I broke in, "that some of the people in this house are possessed? Never mind whether it's a heathen god or a devil . . . "

To this I could get no answer. I fancy that in Mrs. Shapland's mind the strong commonsense of the Scotch was contending with immemorial Scottish superstition. She believed, I knew, in second-sight; she half belived in ghosts and banshees. From this it was no long cry to possessive spirits, but her theological preconceptions imposed a bar.

"What's *your* view, professor?," I asked.

He had been standing by himself at the window ever since I told him of my discovery. As he turned, I noticed that he looked at Enid before answering me. I wondered whether he was impressed by finding I had made a convert or whether he was lamenting that she and I were driving each other mad by action and reaction.

"The facts being almost incredible," he replied, "we must not reject even an incredible hypothesis. Your theory explains everything if we can accept it; but, before we accept it, we must try simpler explanations. The marks, for example: could they have been produced by anything but a hoof. There are artificial feet. . . ." The judicial voice suddenly lost its calm; the man of learning was hidden by a man at his wits' end. "Fantastic!" he exclaimed. "I've talked to him, examined him! He's a friend of Escott's. His voice, manner, clothes . . ."

"All that seems very easy to understand, if you accept the main assumption. Do you?"

"Watch him to-night!," the professor enjoined without committing himself. "Ask yourself if that's a man or . . . or . . . or what!"

I stayed upstairs until dinner; and, when I met Stranger in the hall, I checked and almost turned back. No words that I can find will express my feelings about him. I was not frightened, I was not repelled, but I stood in mental quicksands. Either he was a man of flesh-and-blood like myself or he was not. If he was, I had been using the language of a madman about him. If he was not, I had to believe that a house-party, given by a rich American woman at the end of 1924, included among

the guests some one who in spite of his appearance and clothes and speech . . . I could not go on. Lighting a cigarette, I let the red-hot head of the match fall on my hand. I was not dreaming. I was sane in other respects.

2

At the end of dinner I moved to an empty chair beside Punch Escott. Stranger was safely situated out of ear-shot at the far end of the table; and I had half-an-hour before the first guests were expected to arrive.

I received but small reward for my pains. Punch had, as usual, dined well and, as usual, desired only to regale me with obscene reminiscences and stories. He told me that he had been friends with "the dear old boy" all his life and could not remember their first meeting. In the next breath he admitted that he knew nothing about him and had only made his acquaintance a few weeks earlier.

"Stranger in name, old boy, stranger in fact," he muttered thickly. "Strange feller altogether. This is a far, far stranger thing than I have ever done . . . Oh, I say, I heard a story the other day that will amuse you . . ."

"You're not even sure whether that's his name?," I asked.

"He *answers* to it, old boy, he *answers* to it. And that's all that matters. My name isn't Punch, it's George Frederick Aloysius, I would have you know, but I *answer* to Punch. Aloysius! If I caught any one calling me Aloysius, I don't quite know what I should do. You see, I couldn't *deny* it, old boy," he explained

with drunken solemnity: "if you said 'Word of honour, yes or no, is your name Aloysius . . . ?' I could refuse to answer, I suppose? I could say pretty sharply: 'My name's my own business! I don't know you, sir! You're a stranger to me, sir!' . . . Oh, I say, that's rather good: 'a *stranger* to me.' Dam' good! I must tell these others!"

He was starting to his feet, but coffee was brought in at this moment and he kept his place for fear of missing the liqueurs. I felt that I was unlikely to hear anything of interest that night. Punch was not intoxicated, but I fancy his system was so saturated with alcohol that he normally exhibited the inconsequence and silliness of a drunken man. There was some story that he wanted to tell me; and, until he had told me, he would not answer my questions. I let him have his way and only pulled him up when he began to talk about Miss Arley in a manner that I could not allow. I said we would dispense with names; and on that he turned sulky.

"If you want to know so much, why don't you ask *him?*," he demanded.

"I don't want to know much: I want to know whether he lost his foot in the war or whether he's always been lame. It seems such bad luck. He looks as if he might have been a fine athlete. I can't ask *him*."

"He's been like that ever since *I've* known him."

"And you've known him all your life?," I persisted.

"All my life, old boy, all my life. Met him last week for the first time. I took a fancy to him; and he took a fancy to me. He lives with me. He's promised never to leave me. No end of a feller."

"Does he belong to these parts?"

"Ah, now you're asking. When I first met him . . .

I can't tell you just how or where it was, because I don't remember. There was a party at my place. What you might call a little convivial gathering . . ."

I gave up the attempt at rational conversation and turned my attention to Keith, who was sitting on my other side. We had not been together since the night before, when I helped him to his room, and I was interested to see whether he would refer to his fight with Peter. He did not. Indeed, beyond a grumble at the idea of the ball, he hardly spoke. And yet he was not embarrassed by my speaking to him; he did not repel me as I should undoubtedly have repelled him if our positions had been reversed. Unsociable he might fairly be called, but he was not antagonistic to me, nor to Peter, who had nearly killed him, nor to Mrs. Reid, whom he had tried to kiss and who had ordered him out of the house. If there had been a general reconciliation, I was told nothing of it; and I doubted whether any one had troubled to become reconciled with any one else. My dogs did not trouble to make up their quarrels: they went to sleep and forgot about them, a course which Peter suggested we should follow in relation to the late war. So far as I could judge, my dogs did not offer apologies when their advances were shewn to be unwelcome; they ran away with a bleeding throat or a torn ear and the incident was closed: a course which Keith seemed to be following in relation to Mrs. Reid. I have known elephants and monkeys and cats to harbour resentment for longer than any human being, but I believe it is generally true that man recollects a grievance and nurses the hope of revenge more steadfastly than the lower animals and that sophisticated man is in this respect more unforgiving than the savage.

"I hope you're feeling all right again now," I said.

"A bit tender," Keith answered. "He doesn't look it, but Peter's pretty strong . . ."

He spoke without resentment, but then animals were not by nature resentful. He and Peter were animals. Had they not proved it? Were they not proving it at this moment?

At this moment I observed signs of restlessness at the far end of the table. For several minutes I had heard cars driving into the courtyard: and Stranger now smiled across to me and said:

"I suppose, in the absence of a host . . . ?"

It was the first time he had addressed me since the morning.

Is this, I asked myself, sophisticated enough for your taste? The professor was watching me; but, as our eyes met, he looked at the clock and jumped up in dismay:

"Yes, indeed! I promised we wouldn't sit long over our wine."

As the others filed into the hall, I stood back to observe them. These, I reminded myself, were the people with a foot and a half in the kingdom of nature, the people I had been dismissing glibly as "animals". Peter was pulling down his waistcoat and straightening his tie as I had seen him do a hundred times. Catching sight of Adela, he hurried forward; and their smile is one of the last things I shall remember before I die. Keith was patting his sleek head. Punch Escott was converting a gurgle of unseemly merriment into a cough. They passed into the hall; and the professor, who had not finished his cigar, asked Mrs. Reid if he might bring it with him. Nothing could have been more decorous, nothing less abnormal.

I heard a voice beside me saying:

"What a charming fellow your professor is!"

"Charming!," I agreed and turned to find that I was speaking to Stranger.

"We've been having a great talk . . . ," he continued.

I did not listen to find out what they had been discussing. I was trying to reconcile this well-bred, well-groomed creature with the image I had presented to Enid and the Shaplands that afternoon. To her and to the professor I had maintained fiercely that the atmosphere of the house had changed in the moment that Stranger crossed the threshold. I had insisted that he was driving half our party mad, that he was not a man but an evil influence, that he bore on his person the mark of the beast. Small wonder that the professor looked at me anxiously!

Stranger was asking whether I danced. . . .

"If I have to," I said. "I'd much sooner have a quiet rubber of bridge if I could make up a four. Do you play?"

"I'm afraid not. I don't do any of the things I ought. That's one reason why I hardly ever come to a party like this. I don't feel I pull my weight. And nowadays every one's so keen on dancing, golf, lawn-tennis . . . "

"*Pull my weight!*" The fellow's very colloquialisms were as conventional as his clothes and bearing.

The sigh with which he ended the sentence did duty for the obvious confession that he was debarred physically from participating in these exercises. I wanted to sympathize; still more I wanted to apologize for my atrocious attack on him that afternoon. The quicksands had turned solid beneath my feet! Then the water

flowed back; and I was fighting again for my reason. Stranger was not debarred from running and leaping when it suited him.

Ebb and flow! Ebb and flow!

"You mustn't let me keep you standing," I said; and I am afraid there was a hateful note of irony in my voice which shewed me that I was unconsciously trying to entrap him.

"I don't mind it," he assured me. "It's no worse than sitting. What I loathe is having to wear a shoe. If I could go about bare-foot . . . As I do, whenever it's practicable . . . Well, here are the first arrivals!"

Limping away from my side, he entered into conversation with Mrs. Shapland, leaving me to make what I chose of his confidences. A stream of cars wound slowly up the drive; and each, as it turned, projected a beam of light through the long windows. Ebb and flow! The hall was not now in darkness; and the effect was less striking than on the first night, but the cause of it was the same. I saw the professor looking at me, as though to say: "Nothing very much in that". On analysis, there was nothing very much, I felt, in anything that had helped to make up my impression of that first evening. Until five minutes before, I imagined I had something that would cause the greatest sceptic to falter; I had in fact convinced Enid and shaken the professor when I told them that a lame man could put off his lameness at will. Now . . .

I DO not know that I am more of a moral coward than my neighbour, but I dreaded the moment when I should

be compelled to disclose that my last weapon had fallen to pieces in my hand. "*I should like to go about bare-foot . . . As I do, whenever it's practicable . . .*" What would Stranger think of the interpretation which I had put upon his lameness? What would Enid think when I explained myself away? Or the Shaplands? My head was ringing with the phrases I had used in building up my fantastic argument: how would that argument sound when it was turned inside-out and employed against me? "*You believe you have discovered something that surprises you,*" I could fancy a cold, judicial voice saying. "*You at once assume that any one who behaves in a way that surprises you must unquestionably be mad. Why, you ask yourself, should any one go mad? Clearly a devil has entered in. Have I anything to support this startling idea?, you continue. Why, yes! One of my fellow-guests lost a foot in the war (Or so he pretends!!) It's easier to believe that he never lost a foot at all, that he has a hoof in place of a foot, that it is a cloven hoof, that therefore he must be . . . What? The great god Pan? The devil? Delusions of this kind, gentlemen of the jury, are, unhappily, far from being uncommon; and any one who finds it easy to believe that Pan has joined a house-party for Christmas will find it yet easier to believe that his fellow-guests have reverted to the life of the jungle. If, as seems only too probable, we must admit that any one is mad, shall we give that name to a company of well-known, highly respected ladies and gentlemen whose extravagant unseemliness of behaviour has escaped every one else's notice, or to the unfortunate creature who imagines that he sees them locked in promiscuous embraces or tearing at one another's throats and eyes? . . .*"

That, or something like that, was what counsel would

say if I let my tongue wag to the point of provoking an action for slander.

Looking back on this moment, I recognize it as the only occasion on which I have seriously doubted my own sanity. Like other men, I have had nightmares; but, at their most extravagant, I have always felt vaguely remote and have always known that I shall recover my reason if I can only wake. I have, like other men, been delirious with fever, but at such times my individuality has been wrested from me, I have not been conscious of any reason waiting for me to recover it. Now my brain seemed to be divided in two, like that of a drunken man who knows that he is drunken. I was mad; and I knew it. What was the next thing to do? I must tell Enid, who already suspected; and I must ask the professor, who was the one man I cared to trust, whether he would make the necessary arrangements. So long as I was harmless, there might be no need to put me in confinement; and it was true to say that, while I kept my delusions at arm's length, I was harming no one. I could think quite calmly and clearly: I remembered the train which we should have to take back to London; I knew even the address of a private home in Buckinghamshire where I could be received if the malady spread.

And I presumed it would. If some kind of mental decay had set in, the first delusion would be followed by others. Surely? On the other hand, I knew of men who were normal in every respect but one, revealing their madness in some pathetic belief that they were Napoleon, or Henry the Eighth, or Saint Peter. . . .

"You wouldn't like to get our coats and take me out on the battlements?"

"Not feeling faint again, are you?," I asked.

In that moment my sanity returned to me; and I ceased to brood over delusions. Enid had crossed the hall and was looking at me with the expression that she always assumed when she had a small conspiracy to broach.

"There's going to be a terrible crush," she whispered. "If we could slip away quietly for half an hour till the thing gets going and the introductions are over . . ."

"It'll be pretty cold outside," I warned her.

"I don't mind that, if I get some fresh air. It's this appalling stuffiness . . ."

"You feel that still?"

Enid looked round the hall; and I saw her eyes rest for a moment on Stranger. He was talking to Mrs. Shapland, laughing as he talked and revealing admirably white and regular teeth in contrast to the brownness of his hair and skin. Pleasant-looking, rather than handsome, I decided, with that aquiline nose; certainly a soldier, though—as at our first meeting—I could not judge his race by his appearance; a man of thirty-eight, in hard condition, with a good tailor to help him. At any moment I expected to see one of the other men putting a hand on his shoulder and exclaiming that they had not met since Givenchy or Dixmude. . . .

"It seems to come and go," she answered. "Why the others don't notice it . . ."

"Some of them do," I said. "Mrs. Shapland, for one. I've heard two or three people commenting on it. It comes and goes with one person. It's an atmosphere he brings with him, though he's not the cause of it. . . . Enid, I've had a bad five minutes: I've been wondering whether I was out of my mind. Any one would say I

was, if you repeated what I told you this afternoon. The Shaplands think it already."

"They didn't see what I saw yesterday," Enid answered with a shudder as we threaded our way to the staircase.

"And yet even that might be explained. Stranger told me to-night he always went about bare-foot when he could. Do you truly and earnestly believe . . . oh, what shall I say?, that he's different from the rest of us? I think so when I'm away from him, but, on my soul, when I sit talking to him . . . That's what makes me doubt my own senses! I've seen things here which I can hardly believe, but it doesn't seem to make any difference to any one! To-night they're all rational, they've forgotten all that happened before. . . . *You've* talked to the fellow. You found him charming. *If* he's like every one else . . ."

"He's not," Enid interrupted. "He's something more. If you see him playing with animals, feeding birds . . . I didn't think anything of it at the time . . ."

"Then if he's what we think . . . It's absurd, Enid! We're staying in the same house with him! He talks and dresses like the rest of us. Look at him now, being introduced to that girl in blue . . ."

Ebb and flow! Ebb and flow!

"I've stayed in the same house as a ghost," Enid answered soberly. "I didn't see it, but some of the others did. It was like *Macbeth*. Mr. Stranger . . . *Mister* Stranger," she laughed derisively at herself. "He doesn't belong to us; and we don't belong to him. If I didn't feel that, I should be frightened out of my life, but I know he can't touch me. He doesn't try. We're not his people. The others . . ." She clutched my arm

with an air of sudden discovery. "Frank, the others exist for us, but I've the queerest feeling that we don't exist for them. They're slipping away. . . . If they'd died, if their spirits were becoming more and more remote, I should have the same feeling. When I talk to Adela, she doesn't seem to hear what I'm saying. She's in another world; and she has to make a tremendous effort when she wants to get back. It's like some one struggling against an anæsthetic. I only hope she doesn't do something desperate before all these people." . . .

As we walked upstairs to the gallery, I recalled the astonishing vehemence with which every one had expressed himself before luncheon when the ball was being discussed. Did these others realize that they were in another world? Did they shrink from the effort of struggling back?

4

WE pulled two chairs to the front of the gallery as the band began to tune up.

I observed a number of unexpected friends in the parties that had been brought from neighbouring houses, but I was only concerned to see if these unprejudiced newcomers found anything amiss with the house and whether our own party was going to behave normally. Looking down from our shadowy heights on the blaze and throng in the hall, I felt that I was watching a play in which a dance was taking place in a supposititious room next door. As on a stage, the music formed an intermittent and remote accompaniment to the scraps of dialogue on the boards below us: it swelled overwhelmingly, as the doors opened, and died away as they closed. We watched our hostess lingering to welcome the late arrivals and at

last allowing herself to be led by the professor into the ballroom. We saw the young people seeking partners and the old drifting in search of card-tables. The chatter of the ball-room mingled with the chatter of the hunting-field.

"Are you going to the Kennedys' on the fifteenth?," I heard. "Good, we shall meet!" . . .

"I only had a week before this infernal foot-and-mouth order came out." . . .

"The band's playing much too fast! I can't stay the course." . . .

"I saw George at the puppy-show. He told me then that, if he couldn't hunt this year, he'd have to give up the hounds." . . .

"Air! I want air! Central heating is all very well, but I wish it didn't *smell* so. That room, *really* . . . This is better." . . .

At the end of the first dance the doors of the ball-room were thrown open; and a babbling, many-coloured stream poured into the hall and washed over the lowest stairs.

"A match, a match! My kingdom for a match!," I heard.

"I'll come in, if you want a fourth, but I'm no player." . . .

"How does Archie like his new huntsman?," . . .

"I've been so terribly late the last few nights that I *must* go home early. If you'd like to give me some supper first . . . ?"

I turned to Enid, as the pianist struck a preliminary chord, and suggested that we should go down. (This ball was in every way the same as any that I had attended in the last five years. The voice that had complained

of the central heating was the only one that we could invoke on our side. And once again, with a feeling that my brain was divided into separate and mutually critical parts, I wondered what the prosaic fox-hunters below me would say if I broke into their discussion of "Archie's" new huntsman and the foot-and-mouth-disease order to enquire what they thought of my fellow-guests and their sanity. Mrs. Reid had been snatched from the professor and was promising dances that stretched into the remote hours of the next day. Punch Escott was telling his partner that he knew where he could get her a drink. And I heard Stranger thanking the girl in blue who had spared a dance to sit out with him.

"Well?" I said.

Enid shook her head:

"There's something unreal about this place, Frank. Are they dreaming of us or are we dreaming of them? I hardly know what I'm saying. I'm not sure that even I am quite real. You don't think *I'm* taking the infection, do you?"

"Good God!" I cried.

"If I stay here much longer . . . It's a nightmare! I've nothing to catch hold of . . . I think I shall go to bed. Don't bother to come with me. I shall be all right. I mustn't give in to ridiculous fancies."

So it was that, as the second dance began, I left Enid at her door and returned alone to the gallery. So it was that I had no witness when I needed one most, though there would doubtless have been nothing for us to see or hear if we had remained in our old place at the head of the stairs. When we left the gallery, we left it empty; but I heard voices by the oak rooms, as I approached it on my return. One of them said:

"Clumsy brute! You've torn my dress. I must go and change it!"

"I'm most awfully sorry," answered the other.

"If you were half a man, you'd offer to help!"

The accompanying faint laugh identified the speaker as Nora Helmsley. I did not recognize the voice that whispered:

"Is this your room?"

A key was grating cautiously in a lock as I went downstairs.

I found the doors of the ball-room open; and for a few minutes I stood watching the dancers. Keith was fidgeting discontentedly by himself; and, when he strode by me with a muttered "I'm fed up", I wondered whether he was going to the oak rooms. In the hall, however, he encountered some girl he knew and disappeared with her in the direction of the armoury. Peter was dancing dutifully, though with an expression of ineffable boredom; and at the end of the dance I heard him murmur an excuse and saw him leave his partner stranded in the middle of the floor. Finding Adela disengaged, I asked her for the next dance. She had apparently decided that our conversation in her room was to be forgotten, perhaps she herself hardly remembered that it had taken place: and we met as we had been meeting for the last ten years.

The next dance, she told me, was already promised to Mr. Stranger.

"The one after?," I suggested.

"To be quite honest, I'm not going to dance again," she answered. "There's such a mob of people . . . And the noise and the light . . . I'm quite dazed. And it's so absurd! Hugging to music"!

Before the war, Adela had been an exquisite and a devoted dancer. I should not have been surprised a week earlier, if she had told me that she had given up dancing; but, as she had miraculously reverted in the last two days to the Adela Glynde whom I had first known, I was startled by her misanthropic condemnation of it as "hugging to music".

"I didn't expect such a phrase from you," I said.

She seemed not to hear me; and, as I looked at her eyes, I was reminded of an owl that I had once seen brought into a brilliantly lighted room.

"*They're slipping away.*" . . . Was that the phrase Enid had used?

5

I SPENT my last hour, before going to bed, in the smoking-room, where a young man—unknown to me—was taking the bank at roulette. Being no better acquainted with his friends than with himself, I pulled a chair to the fire and began to read a book. I did not intend to eavesdrop, but the voices of the young men carried so penetratingly that I feared they would be overheard by Mrs. Reid, who formed the staple of their conversation, as—I should imagine—of most in this part of Northumberland.

"I came to see what she was like," said one.

"I came to see what the party was like," said another.

"I heard Punch was going to be here."

"Oh, *Punch!*"

At this point the other voices fell silent as one narrated a story that was no doubt the latest escapade in the Escott *saga*. I did not hear it, but at the end some one

murmured "My God!". Some one else opined that, if "this" got out, it would "about do for old Punch."

"This county will always stand a good deal, but there *are* limits."

"A bit thick, wasn't it?"

I repeat, I did not hear the story of this escapade, I have not heard it yet. It is a missing link in my narrative, though not—I fancy—an important link. Before I left, Nateby Castle had begun to be boycotted; and I daresay Punch's latest infamy was a contributory cause. From the voices and manner of the young men who were discussing it, I felt sure that "this", whatever it was, would in fact "get out"; but I had too much on my mind to trouble about Punch Escott or a possible boycott of Nateby.

CHAPTER TEN

INDEPENDENT WITNESSES

I

WHAT time the ball came to an end I never discovered. I went upstairs soon after two and shut my door on the sound of a distant waltz. Enid was already asleep. Otherwise, I should have asked her to pack without waiting for her maid; and I resolved that, when she awoke, I would tell her we must go back to London that day.

Before undressing, I took my temperature. It was still slightly above the normal, but not enough for me to pretend I was delirious. My head, indeed, was unusually clear for so late an hour; and, though my nerves were limp and my will slack, I could trust my judgement. At some point lately the professor had enunciated that, in treating of almost incredible facts, we must not reject even an incredible explanation. When Adela gave herself to a man she never affected to love and when Keith and Peter fought for her like animals, I was driven to say that a spirit had entered into them all; I had not been satisfied, I was not satisfied now, that Adela was undergoing a reaction from the unnatural austerity of her former life or that Peter was the victim of a sudden seizure.

No longer was it possible, however, to maintain the hypothesis which I had myself believed and forced my wife to share. I made no excuses for having held it. I should make no excuses for feeling frightened, if, in the middle of a debate on ghosts, the lights failed and a door swung open of its own accord. For a day or two my thoughts had run on certain lines; and for a moment I was confronted with phenomena which seemed to turn an extravagant fantasy into sober fact. My critical faculty had been dislocated by successive shocks; and a condition of intermittent fever is unfavourable to the nice balancing of improbabilities.

Turning the last pages of my diary and remarking the hints of what I had not dared to express frankly, I could only be thankful that I had not proclaimed my delusion more widely. Of their charity, the Shaplands must believe that I was light-headed when I told them that one of our fellow-guests had a cloven hoof!

"After dinner," I wrote, "I tried to find out when Stranger had lost his foot. Punch was too fuddled to help. I fancy it must have been in the late war, as he is not yet used to being without it. Indeed, he told me that he always went barefoot when possible. This explains—and explains away—much that has been perplexing me."

It did not, I reflected sadly, explain or explain away the epidemic of moral aberration which was attacking one member of our party after another. Who would be the next to go? I had no fears for Enid, but I was not sure that she had no fears for herself. Stranger's personal charm she admitted; in the last two days she had doubtless felt, like the rest of mankind, that life would be easier if it were less full of artifice. Was she afraid that this could be construed into a change of allegiance?

I interrupted my writing to push open the door between our rooms. She was sleeping tranquilly enough; and, after pulling back the curtains and opening the window, I returned to my work. Below me, the courtyard was brilliant with electric links thrust into conical holders. Home-bound cars were rolling silently up to the doors and silently driving away. I saw one or two couples venturing into the night air and hurrying back with a shiver. Then Stranger limped out by himself and stood in the middle of the courtyard, looking up at the stars.

For a reason which I did not define at the time, I turned out the lights in my room. I suppose I wanted to watch without shewing him that he was being watched. After standing motionless for several minutes, he turned slowly; and his eyes seemed to move from one to another of the lighted windows above him. When he came to ours, I fancied that he looked longer, though at best there was no more to see than a chink of fire-light between the curtains. Then, bare-headed and without an overcoat, he limped away down the stone slope that led from the courtyard to the park.

I was moving to turn on the lights when I heard a sound in the next room. Enid was sitting up in bed, with one hand pushing back the bed-clothes and the other reaching for a dressing-gown from the chair beside her. I asked if she wanted anything, but she seemed not to hear me. Then, though I moved into the light of the fire, I found that she did not see me. Her eyes were wide-open, but they looked through me; and many moments passed before I realized that she was asleep.

I have never been required to take charge of a somnambulist, but at the back of my mind lurked the

knowledge that Enid must not be awakened. I locked both doors and engaged in the strangest game of blind-man's-buff that a man could play, pulling chairs and tables aside, dodging out of the way myself and holding a pillow to fend her as she drew near to wall or door. At the end of ten minutes she went back to bed and sat staring about her with a puzzled frown, as though trying to understand why she was being held a prisoner. Then the eye-lids drooped over the wide eyes and she turned her head, with a sigh, from the light of the fire.

I undressed and lay down on her sofa. When the professor, in judicial mood, told me that even an incredible hypothesis must not be discarded hastily, he added that the simpler explanations should be tried first. It was simple to say that Enid was overtired, overexcited and that to-night, for the first time in her life, she was sleep-walking, as—for the first time in her life—she had fainted the day before. No possible connection could be established between the presence of Stranger in the courtyard and her attempt to get out of her room. The incident was closed; I did no good by thinking about it; and, as the doors were still locked, there was no reason why I should not go to bed.

Instead, I lay staring into the fire and thinking of this accursed house in a way that would have set me blushing half-an-hour before when I acquitted Stranger and put on record that I had been light-headed in my suspicions. For the first time since the night of our arrival, I fell to thinking of Adela's curious question, what remained at Nateby when the family that had ruled there for nigh on a thousand years ruled no longer. Had the god of the Dennisons withdrawn when his shrine was deserted? Was Nateby the spoil of the

strongest? Had the citadel, half-unconsciously, been surrendered? "Accursed" I had called the house; accursed I knew it to be, for all the simple explanations proffered by those who had not with their own eyes seen one soul after another stolen away. Accursed, I told myself, it became, despite my "rationalism", in the hour when Stranger crossed the threshold.

From this moment, I can see now, a change overcame my attitude towards him. Who or what he was I no longer cared. We were matched for a duel, with Enid for prize. All the fear and horror that normal men feel for a shark or snake I felt for the creature who had stood in the courtyard looking up at Enid's windows.

A duel, did I say? It was an encounter from which I ran away with all the speed at my command. When Enid awoke, uncritical at finding me on the sofa in her room, I told her that we must leave that day.

"Uncle John makes quite a good excuse," I said. "They've decided to operate; and, though there's not supposed to be any danger, we can say that he's an old man and so forth. My nerves are beginning to crack. I can't stand any more of this business. One talks about 'entertaining angels unawares', but with a creature like Stranger . . ."

Enid reached for a block of telegraph-forms and began to write.

"There's a train just after luncheon, isn't there?," she asked. "I don't altogether like the idea of leaving these people in their present state . . ."

"We can do no good by staying here," I answered; and then I told her of Nora's overnight escapade. "The rot seems to be spreading."

On an impulse, Enid slipped out of bed and crossed to the window, where she stood looking down on the courtyard.

"I shall be the next to go. Heaven knows I don't want to, but my will seems to be slackening. If Mr. Stranger told me to do something . . . If he wanted me to do something, without telling me . . . I'll ask Annie to pack for us both. Before we go, I might have a word with Adela . . . "

"What will you say?"

"I must see what opening she gives me. And I'll leave you to make our excuses to Mrs. Reid. I think something ought to be said, Frank. I don't understand her, she doesn't seem to have any idea of what's going on." . . .

2

As soon as I was dressed, I went downstairs in search of the professor. I was intercepted by Mrs. Reid before I could tell him my latest discovery; and, as I was carrying a bundle of letters, I took the opportunity of telling her about my uncle and of dropping a hint that we should have to leave Nateby that day. I was expecting some expression of surprise, but Mrs. Reid shewed none. I was expecting her to ask about trains and to order a car, but she received my announcement in silence. When I produced my telegrams, however, and mentioned that I should like to catch the two-fifty, she astonished me by saying that she would not let us go.

"I'm not going to have my party spoiled," she told me with more decision than a hostess usually exhibits to a guest.

"It's a case of necessity," I said with firmness equal to her own.

"But you say they're not operating till they've given him time, poor man, to get up his strength? That means you needn't run away till after Christmas. He's not in immediate danger."

"He's an old man."

"He's only three days older than when you came here," retorted Mrs. Reid with startling sharpness. "If the Shaplands can stay, you can."

So the professor, too, had recollected an engagement in some other part of the country! I hardly knew whether to be intrigued by his frustrated bolt or resentful that he had attempted it without consulting me.

"I didn't know there was any question of their going," I said.

"There wasn't till this morning. Oh, what's the good of playing Pussy-come-out-of-the-corner with *me*? I suppose it's this Nixon business that's peeving you?"

"I don't even know what the Nixon business is."

Mrs. Reid looked at me with raised eyebrows:

"I guess you're the one man on this sector of the map that doesn't! And *you* soon *will*. It was one of the young Nixons from Atherton. He was found in Nora Helmsley's room. You were some place else—bed, I shouldn't wonder—, but I should have thought you must have heard the noise when Keith broke in. If only I'd stood pat by what I said and insisted on their both leaving the other day . . . I've told her there'll be a car for them at twenty-past-two; and they needn't trouble to come say good-bye."

She was still tremulous from her late altercation; and I muttered some phrase of conventional sympathy.

"It was the best I could do," she answered tearfully. "And so I told Mrs. Shapland. There's no call to punish *me* because folk choose to behave like that."

She turned away and dabbed at her eyes. It will seem a strange, perhaps a heartless, thing to say, but my sole unspoken comment on the story was: "An independent witness at last!" At the same time, I felt that this was hardly the moment to disclose all that had gone before this latest outrage.

I asked what line the injured husband was taking.

"Gracious, what *can* he do?," Mrs. Reid returned. "The one's as bad as the other; and they can go fight it out between themselves."

I was agog with questions, but, before I could ask the first, I heard a light step behind me and turned to find Nora herself, languid and lovely, descending the stairs. She was preceded by a wave of the rich scent in which she drenched herself whenever Keith was not at hand to restrain her; and her dress, I thought, was more suitable for the Royal Enclosure at Ascot than for a winter house-party in Northumberland. Assuredly, it was not the costume of one who intended to leave the house for London in an hour's time; and, as she bade us good morning, I felt that her manner was not that of a guest who was being turned away in disgrace. When the two women met face to face, I searched my memory for a parallel, in life or on the stage. Mrs. Reid was beyond castigating or demanding explanations; she hardly gave the impression of such personal resentment as an outraged hostess might legitimately feel, but her whole body quivered with indignation. And Nora dropped into a chair between us as though she was blind to the other's scorching enmity. Watching her face, I tried to detect

impudence under the superb calm; but impudence is the negation of shame and Nora had no shame to suppress. Impudence, too, is commonly a weapon; and she gave no sign of needing a weapon either of attack or of defence. Picking up an illustrated paper, she glanced cursorily at the photographs of celebrities at steeple-chases until Keith, who had followed her into the hall, tapped her arm and pointed out that Mrs. Reid was speaking to her.

"I said you needn't bother to come say good-bye," Mrs. Reid reminded her in a shaking voice.

"Don't you worry, I'm not going to," answered Nora. "You can't turn us out, Henrietta, after asking us here. We're going on to Scotland next week; and it's acting silly to think we can go back to London for about five days. You *asked* us to stay till after the New Year."

"That was *before* . . ." Mrs. Reid began.

"I never *did* see such a person to nag! Why people can't mind their own business! If Mr. Dixon and I . . ."

Mrs. Reid contrived to check her without speaking. I looked at my watch and murmured that I must write some letters before luncheon.

"Stay right here!" Mrs. Reid commanded. "I shall want you. Well, Nora?"

"Well?"

"It *may* interest you to know the young man's name is *Nixon*."

"Thanks very much and all that, but it doesn't interest me in the least; and it beats me to know how it can interest any one else. He didn't ought to have kept the others waiting; and I told him off for that. It all seems a great fuss about nothing," she concluded with a yawn.

"Nothing? My! You call it nothing . . ."

Nora sighed with the false patience of one who is forced to tell for the third time a story that never needed to be told once.

"My goodness, how you do go on! We'd danced as much as we wanted. More . . . He was a nice boy, who happened to have a crush on me; which I think shewed his good taste. I can't imagine anything more natural. You should be the last person to object, Henrietta, with your well-known views on nature and the simple life."

I listened in amazement. Nora declined to defend herself. If I might be regarded as a neutral, she was supplying me with weapons to attack her. Her boredom was unconcealed, but she spoke without brazenness or bravado.

"Aren't . . . aren't you *ashamed* of yourself?," Mrs. Reid burst out. *ashamed of yourself?*

"Are you *ashamed* of yourself for drinking a glass of water when you're thirsty?," Nora mimicked. "I don't understand you, Henrietta: you were the first to say what artificial lives we all lead, but, when I behave like a natural, healthy woman, you ask me if I'm not ashamed of myself. It may interest you to know I'm not! Not a bit! Up to now I've been ever so good! I'm not a fool and I know my value. Then I didn't see what was to be gained by it. I wanted a *little* fun in my life. I suppose that's natural enough? And now, because you don't know your own mind for two minutes together, you say I must leave the house! It's absurd! *Isn't it absurd, Frank?*"

By now, my amazement had passed. In temper, if not in phrasing, Nora's apology was very like the one

which I had heard from Adela. Indeed, the only difference was that the audience now was bigger and that Nora had lapsed into the native vulgarity from which Keith had laboured so long to elevate her.

"Mrs. Reid must decide what she tolerates in her own house and what she won't," I answered.

"And I won't tolerate that, Nora Helmsley," our hostess cried. "Why, gracious, Mrs. Shapland came to tell me she couldn't stay here any longer. Mr. Kingsbury's been trying to say the same thing, but I don't let him. I've told him, as I told the Shaplands, that he needn't be afraid. There'll be no more of this, I said. The Helmsleys are leaving to-day, I told him . . ."

She stopped at the sound of a mocking laugh from Nora.

"If you say I'm to go, I'll go. But I shan't go alone. It's not fair to single me out. I'll go, but I promise you I'll let every one know, Henrietta . . ."

The undisguised menace in Nora's voice undermined her opponent's attack. Mrs. Reid seemed to change colour.

"Know what?," she asked.

"About Adela and Keith, of course. And Peter Colyton. And Jocelyn Arley. And Punch Escott."

3

MRS. REID felt for a chair; and I sprang up to catch her if she should fall. She tried to speak, but no words would come. When the butler approached to know where the cocktails should be served, I took it upon myself to say that the hall was the most convenient place.

Nora, meanwhile, crossing one knee over the other and lazily turning the pages of her paper, pressed home her victory with a quiet indifference more deadly than any vehemence:

"You see, my dear, it was you began it. Arc . . . whatever the place is. . . . You mustn't round on us for taking your advice. I didn't blame Keith when he went off that first night with Adela. He meant nothing to me. . . . I didn't blame him when he kissed you that other night, though I thought it silly of you to make such a song and dance about it. If you didn't want him, you shouldn't have led him on. . . . I suppose it's your nature, though, to tempt people and then run away, so I mustn't blame you . . ."

"Led him on!," Mrs. Reid echoed in a whisper hardly audible.

The clock in the courtyard struck half-past one; and, as I poured out the cocktails, our party began to assemble. Punch Escott came first, unkempt and sodden; then the professor, apologizing for his wife and explaining sheepishly that she had a headache. As he lighted a cigarette, I noticed that his hand was trembling and I observed in his eyes an expression—of bewilderment and dismay—which I dare say I had worn from time to time in the last few days. He shook his head at me helplessly, as though to ask whether he was mad or only dreaming.

"I'll put it to Professor Shapland," said Nora. "If one goes, we must all go, but he shall say whether it's fair for us to be turned out . . ."

Without waiting for the terms of reference to be defined, the professor declined with trepidation the task of referee:

"My dear lady, you mustn't make *me* the arbiter! Mrs. Reid is the *only* person . . . I'm less fitted than any one . . . You see, I have myself to leave . . ."

"You can't drag your wife away if she's not well; and you can't go without her," Nora decided.

"The car . . .," Mrs. Reid began firmly, only to leave the ultimatum unfinished.

I wondered whether Enid had remembered to have my things packed. Again and again I looked impatiently towards the stairs, wishing that she would come down. Sorry as I was feeling for Mrs. Reid, I could not consent to pass another night in the house; and, now that she knew what I had been charged to tell her, I did not think she would want to keep us.

Taking the professor aside, I told him that, if four of us left that afternoon, the party would be effectually broken up and the others could not, for very decency, stay on in defiance of Mrs. Reid's wishes. "Decency", as the professor pointed out, seemed an ill-chosen word, but he agreed that it would be difficult for the Helmsleys at least to remain.

"And if they won't go," I said, "they'd better be left in possession of the field. Mrs. Reid must come to London with us . . ."

"I doubt if she'll do that. Would you, in her place? It's not the indignity I'm thinking of, but while these people are behaving as though they were possessed . . ."

"Ah!"

"I don't say they are! I'm ready to accept any explanation, though. If Stranger . . . I don't agree with you for a moment, but the change *does* date from the moment he arrived. I've been arguing with my wife

all the morning. I say we *can't* leave them at his mercy. And yet . . . He came in to return a book I'd lent him; and we talked for half-an-hour as I might be talking to you. Absurd! . . . And yet . . . Can't we *tackle* him, Frank? Establish *something!* . . ."

He stopped as the door of the justice-room opened and Peter came into the hall. My proffered cocktail was refused; and I realized that, since the first night, I had seen Peter drink nothing but water. Once, from old habit, he had lighted a cigarette; but I remembered that he threw it away with a grimace.

"Well, how's everybody after the dissipations of last night?," he enquired genially. He looked round the hall; and I thought his face fell when he discovered that Adela was not there. "I've come to the conclusion that my dancing days are over and I'm wondering why they ever began. When you think of two or three hundred people in a hot room, all dressed in the most absurd clothes . . ."

"If it comes to that, all clothes are equally absurd," said Keith.

I wondered whether the next milestone on the road back to nature would be decorated with the discarded raiment of these wild creatures. It was "natural", I supposed, for Nora to deck or display herself in the manner best calculated to attract a male; but Keith, at other times a dandy, now seemed to think it "unnatural" to care for his person. His hair was rumpled, his chin unshaven; and his clothes looked as if he had slept in them.

His voice recalled Nora to her duel with Mrs. Reid.

"Well, what's it to be?," she demanded. "Keith! Come and stand up for me! Henrietta is trying to turn

me out of the house because of the Dixon boy. I say, if any one has to go, it must be you and Adela."

I did not hear Keith's mumbled answer, but I saw Peter eyeing him sharply; and I thought that Keith flinched. Since the night of their struggle, when he was defending himself, Keith had been strangely unassertive. When I thought of his conquering manner in old days, I wondered whether he had been imposing on us with his swagger. Somewhere at the back of my memory there lingered a suspicion that he had not distinguished himself for personal bravery during the war. Judging only by his looks and words, I had dismissed the suspicion. The psychologists tell us that man, by which they mean "man, the social animal", never confesses to cowardice for fear of putting himself at the mercy of all his fellows: bravery is the last pretence he abandons. It is only "natural", however, for the timorous of the animal kingdom to run away.

I was studying a once-handsome face that now seemed weak and once-bold eyes that now looked shifty, when a door in the gallery opened and Adela came down with my wife. What had passed between them I did not know at the time, but Adela hurried into the hall, three stairs in front of Enid, and strode up to Mrs. Reid.

"Nora tells me you're being silly," she opened. "What's all the trouble? Why can't you leave things alone? She hasn't interfered with you. Why should you interfere with her?"

It is impossible for me to disentangle the tumult that broke out on this word or to set down in orderly dialogue what was in fact a clamour of six or eight voices all speaking at once. I remember the phrase "Bedlam let loose"; and from the tone of agony in which it was spoken I

hall. Catching sight of the girl, he lurched forward and steered her unsteadily towards the cocktail-table.

"What's happening," she asked in surprise.

"Don't know, my dear, don't know," Punch answered dully. "Great deal of noise . . . Been waiting for you . . ."

He laid a tremulous and mottled hand on the girl's bare arm, but she drew away from him and looked in bewilderment at the flushed and angry faces all round her.

"Please don't paw me!," I heard her say; and then, again, "What's happening?"

Before any one else could speak, Nora took it upon herself to explain:

"Henrietta's being a fool. Perhaps she can't help that, but she's not going to get on her high horse at my expense. If you and Punch . . ."

I saw the girl's hand rising to protect herself. Her cheeks paled for a moment and then flamed.

"What . . . what d'you mean?," she stammered.

Nora laughed derisively; and, with the most pathetic gesture of helplessness that I have ever seen, the girl caught at Punch's arm and pulled him half in front of her as a shield. For a moment, I think, she tried to nerve herself for a denial; but the fear of Nora's coarse ridicule kept her tongue-tied.

The professor, too, must have noticed her slight movement, for I heard a groan of horror.

"You see for yourself now," I told him.

"I *can't* believe it!"

He followed with anguished eyes, while the girl, with a faint shrug, went forward to the excited group by the fire. I have never heard how old Jocelyn was at this time, but

I shall not be far wrong in saying she could have been hardly more than twenty. At first I was rather misled by her self-possession, which had enabled her to cross the Atlantic unattended and to take care of herself for six months in divers European capitals; but any one who looked at her without preconception must have called her scarcely more than a child. Her straight, lissom figure was still unformed; her thin arms and legs had not yet been given time to fill out; her face and neck had the sharpness of one who has not done with growing. I should have said she was too young to be interested in men, too fresh and fragrant to jeopardize her bloom, too dainty for any feeling but disgust for the bloated and sodden figure beside her. And yet she was now making an avowal which turned Adela Glynde's late confidences into commonplaces.

"I suppose it's only natural I should want to know about things," she began. "I was crazy to find out when I was in school, but no one knew anything for sure. Every one's the same, I guess, girls *and* boys, only we always pretend. Then Lord Escott . . . I think it's all a lot of fuss about nothing, but I had to find out for myself. It's only natural . . ."

"Natural for you and Lord Escott . . .?," gasped Mrs. Reid.

Jocelyn turned to her first lover with an expression of faint surprise at the question. He was drinking a cocktail; and, as he set down his glass, she grimaced slightly and wiped his lips with her handkerchief. Preoccupied as a pig when its trough is filled, he picked up a second glass and drained it, knocked over another and contrived to raise a third to his mouth. I watched in fascination. He seemed unconscious that any one was watching him,

unconscious indeed that any one else was present. If he had been asked to say where he was or how he had come thither, I doubt if the clouded brain could have answered. Looking at him, I recalled that Lord Rochester was supposed to have been drunk for three years—I think—on end, Jack Mytton for a longer period; I wondered what test of drunkenness had been applied. If in twenty years I had never seen Punch Escott completely drunk, I question if I had ever seen him entirely sober.

How much did he realize of all that had been happening in the last three days? What did he make of this girl who had attached herself to him? It was not this, however, which fascinated me: I was trying to read Jocelyn's mind. Only another woman could say how she had come to tolerate Punch in the first instance, but the moment in which she had belonged to him seemed to have blinded her to his physical repulsiveness. It mattered not whether he was tall or short, fair or dark, he was the man who had changed her from child to woman. Consciously or not, the recollection of this had begotten a new loyalty. Her curiosity was satisfied and her passion had never been awakened, but for a time at least she would stand by Punch. After Enid's belated warning, the girl had avoided him; when he touched her, she drew away; but, when she was attacked, it was his support that she sought and, when retribution overtook him later, it was she who came to his assistance.

"Jocelyn Arley, I'm speaking to you." Mrs. Reid's voice, shrill to breaking-point, broke in on my reverie. "Is this true?"

"I've said so once," the girl answered. "I've done what every boy and girl of my age would do if they weren't all frightened . . ."

"O God! O God!," the professor groaned.

"And I say there's nothing *to* this love-business," she continued.

"Aren't you *ashamed* . . .?," Mrs. Reid began.

The girl shook her head:

"I don't want it talked about because it might do me harm, but I'm not ashamed of being natural."

Nora looked at her watch and sighed with relief as the doors of the banqueting-hall were thrown open.

"Well?," she challenged her hostess. "If I'm to leave here in fifty minutes, I must tell my maid to pack. And I should like a bite of food first. Can't we go in? Oh, you're waiting for Mr. Stranger. . . . Which is it to be?"

Before Mrs. Reid could answer, the scene was once more dominated by Adela, who answered for her:

"You'll stay here, Nora. I shan't even say: 'If *you* go, we shall *all* go.' I've no intention of going. If we choose to live a natural life, that's our affair." She turned fiercely upon Enid. "Any one who thinks nature's wrong can go on thinking so. That's *your* business. And I don't interfere with you. If you can't stay in the same house without interfering with me, it's time *you* went. If a thing's natural, it can't be wrong."

I touched my wife's hand in the hope of keeping her out of an altercation in which she was likely to be worsted; but by now we were all too much excited to control our tongues.

"It may be natural to kill people who get in your way," she answered, "as Peter tried to kill Keith the other night . . ."

"Don't let's drag that up," Keith interposed.

"All the same, it would be wrong," Enid persisted.

"Wrong!," echoed Adela in scorn.

"As you'd have been the first to say a week ago! All that's going on here . . . It's terrible! You're not yourself, Adela. If you'll let me take you away . . ."

"Oh, leave me *alone!*"

"*I can't!* Adela . . ."

The entreaty was cut short as Adela turned on her heel and strode by herself into the banqueting-hall. Through the open doors I saw her walking to the side-table and inspecting the dishes. A palisade of cutlets, built into a mound of potato, took her fancy. She helped herself and began to eat, grasping the bone of the cutlet in her fingers for want of a convenient knife and fork.

"No good waiting," said Nora, preparing to follow. "Ah, here's Mr. Stranger."

The newcomer had stolen in unobserved and was apologizing for his lateness to Mrs. Reid, who greeted him with little hoots of nervous laughter.

"Ask *him*," Adela called from a full mouth.

Finding himself the centre of attention and the judge in a quarrel of which he knew nothing, Stranger shifted from one foot to the other and rubbed his hands in deprecation.

"Right and wrong? Nature? Wrong to kill people?," he murmured, as six eager voices clamoured to enlighten him. "I should say, in the first place, that nature had nothing to do with right or wrong. Right or wrong . . . A thing only becomes wrong when you think it's wrong. Sin does not exist until you evolve a sin-sense. . . . I'm dreadfully sorry to have kept you all waiting. If you're half as hungry as I am . . ."

The hall gradually emptied. I stayed behind with Mrs. Reid who was bending and straightening herself in a paroxysm of hysterics.

5

ENID kept me company and indeed assumed immediate control, leaving me free to sum up the position as well as my dazed brain would allow.

The "almost incredible facts", as the professor called them, were now common property, but a fact more incredible than all the rest had been brought to light in the recriminations of the last half-hour. From time to time Mrs. Reid had enquired whether this one or that was not ashamed of herself, but in Adela, Jocelyn and Nora the sense of shame was dead. Of the men I could not speak: Punch was in another world, Keith had hardly opened his mouth and the babble of voices had driven Peter to the far end of the hall, where he stood looking out of a window and pressing his fingers to his ears.

I call this new shamelessness the most incredible fact of all because man, in every stage but that of most primitive savagery, seems to have been endowed with a sense of modesty whereof the origin is still a subject of contention among psychologists. Furthermore, this impersonal frankness was a new development. On the first night, Keith and Adela were at pains to cover their tracks; Jocelyn had talked to my wife like a novice in a convent and was only now discovering that minor social disabilities might attach to her if her relations with Punch were published abroad. Were there further depths for these demented creatures to plumb? I remembered wondering with ill-timed levity whether, at the next milestone, they would abandon their clothes.

It was no matter for jesting. When I recalled the fierce opposition which many of them had shewn to the

ball of the night before, I realized that they were finding it ever harder to come back, even for a few hours, to the conditions of their former life. In conversation they might listen and answer for a few minutes; then their attention wandered. And now, unconsciously, they were rebelling against habits that should have been second nature to them: Keith, as I have said, was unshaven and the others, excepting Nora, had an air of indefinable slovenliness. Their affliction, then, was not constant; I must expect to see it spreading and hardening its grip.

And the cause?

Listening, half-deafened and wholly dazed, to the clamour of angry voices, I at least had no doubt what had possessed these people. Enid had no doubt; and I am not sure that the professor, at the end, would have said so positively that he did not agree with me. Until we could drive the Stranger back into the darkness to which he belonged, the affliction must continue to spread. And then, as I said it over and over again to myself, he slipped in unobserved, apologizing for his lateness. He was wearing a tweed coat and knickerbockers. I think he said that he had been for a walk and had miscalculated the distance. So little was I conscious of a sinister presence that I had stared at the back of his head for a minute or two before I recognized him.

And yet it was the same presence that had beckoned from the courtyard. I felt for it then the instinctive horror which men feel for influences beyond their control; I felt the same horror now. With a weapon in my hand, I believe I might have rushed in and attacked him.

Then the door opened quietly; and Stranger himself came out. His jaw was working; and he carried a napkin in one hand.

"I came to see how she was getting on, poor woman," he whispered. "Look here, why don't you and your wife go in and have something to eat? I'll mount guard; and if I want anything . . ."

"I'm going to put her to bed," Enid broke in, as though she were defying him. Then she looked up, saw him and added: "Thanks very much all the same. It's most kind of you to offer."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

I

THERE was no question now of our catching the afternoon train to London. The car that was to have carried the Helmsleys into banishment arrived at two o'clock, but I sent it back to the stables and returned to my task of soothing our unfortunate hostess. As I gave the order, I felt that I must assume responsibility for future orders and that I was committed to the house until I could arrange a general evacuation.

I told the butler that Mrs. Reid was worn out after the ball and left him to think what he pleased of the way every one was behaving. The time for keeping up appearances was past. As soon as I could get my patient upstairs and leave her in Enid's care, I was resolved that this party must be broken up. The professor had talked of "tackling" Stranger. What he meant by the phrase I did not know, but before the banqueting-hall emptied I promised myself that I would know what manner of adversary was pitted against me.

Luncheon was over and the men had been left to their wine before I could join them. I told the servants that

I would look after myself and invited Stranger and the professor to keep me company at the end of the table farthest from the place where Punch Escott was lolling like a top-heavy sack. Keith had disappeared. Peter was sleeping in front of the fire.

"A pretty sight," I grumbled, as I sat down.

"I think everybody's tired after last night," said Stranger. "Poor Mrs. Reid . . . She doesn't look strong; and she seems to take so much out of herself."

"She's had a good deal to upset her," I said.

As I helped myself at the side-table, I stole a glance at Stranger and cogitated how the business of "tackling" him was to be begun. Should I ask him if he was related to the tow-haired Stranger twins whom I had known at my tutor's? Should I invent a brother or cousin in some regiment and pretend that I had heard of Stranger from him? Should I reverse the process of the night before and ask how Stranger had become acquainted with Escott? I did not see how any answer could help me. If I was fighting with a man, I could set ordinary snares for him, but in Stranger I did not know what I was fighting. Could he read my thoughts? Was he laughing at me?

Looking back, I cannot recall that I felt any personal fear of him; nor was I ever conscious that he was in any way abnormal. Coming into the room and seeing only his back, I again mistook him for Keith and only realized my mistake when a half-turn revealed the aquiline nose. He was wearing such tweeds as Keith might have worn. He was fidgeting with a wineglass as Keith might have fidgeted. He was to treat the late scene in the hall with an urbanity which only Keith could have equalled in the days when he still studied to be urbane.

"You must have thought we were all behaving very oddly this morning . . .," I began, as I pulled in my chair.

"I noticed nothing," Stranger assured me with his unvarying air of perfect breeding. It was not for a guest or a fellow-guest, I imagined he was saying, to notice anything that could embarrass any one if it were remembered later. "You were discussing some point . . .?"

"Yes. I should like your opinion . . . some time." As I fumbled for my opening sentence, I was reminded of a gruesome story in which a leper puts the "mark of the beast" on one who has desecrated the image of his god. The leper is apprehended and charged to remove his spell. His warders menace him with red-hot gun-barrels, but, as I recollect the story, they do not argue with him. When Stranger hinted his willingness to help me, I was tempted to reply: "*You can remove your spell from this house.*" I was restrained by fear of ridicule. "It was a point that affected several people rather closely; and I'm afraid we were discussing it with some heat. . . . I hardly know where to begin," I ended lamely.

The professor waited for me to extricate myself and then suggested my asking Stranger the question which I had already put to him:

"Does he notice anything unusual about this party?"

"You must remember that I stay in very few houses," Stranger answered. "Unusual in what way?"

"In the behaviour of the guests," I said. "I've stayed in queer houses before now and I've seen people

behaving in an odd way, but this brand of behaviour is new to my experience. Had you joined us in the hall rather earlier, you would have heard three women—one in the presence of her husband—avowing without shame or surprise at their own conduct that they had been consorting with the first man that took their fancy." I paused to let my words sink in. "They spoke of these intimate relationships with no more concern than if they were saying that they had gone for a walk with a friend. And, when those in whom a capacity for surprise still lingers ventured to question them, they replied impatiently that their behaviour was natural and therefore innocent." *Their behaviour was natural.*

I paused again, this time to give Stranger an opportunity of interrogating me if I had not made my meaning clear. He nodded gravely and invited me to go on.

"That was the moment when I came in," he added.

"I said, you recall, that nature could no more be associated with morals than, in the old phrase, virtue could be compared with an isosceles triangle. There is no morality about the way that grass grows or the trees shed their leaves. The only right and wrong that the animals know are what we teach them. Your cat mustn't jump on to the table, your dog mustn't bite strange legs. The wild cat, the undomesticated wolf know nothing of this."

The answer would no doubt have satisfied some members of our party, but it afforded no guidance for people who were trying to lead a "natural" life in the midst of an artificial civilization. Whether in the infancy of the human race there was ever a period before man tasted of the tree of knowledge and learned of good and evil had only an academic interest for us. What

mattered to the professor and to me was that on one day certain people had a rigid and a stern code of right and wrong; on the next it had been abandoned. In impotent rage and horror I remembered Enid's tone as she predicted, half in earnest, that she would be the next to go. It was by chance or by the interposition of providence that I had restrained her overnight when she set out to join Stranger. I felt that he and I were fighting for possession of her mind and will. I recalled once again the grim story of the bound leper and the searing gun-barrels. I told myself that I would stop at nothing, even physical violence.

And then I realized the fatuity of my boasting. Stranger, who had plucked Keith and Peter out of the bog-hole with one hand, was a match for half-a-dozen ordinary men.

"When I ask if this party seems unusual," I explained, "I should say that an extraordinary change has overtaken some of its members since we arrived here. I am trying to account for it . . ."

"I'm rather handicapped," said Stranger, "by not having met them before the change. For myself, I take people as I find them." . . .

I am not sure whether he was attempting a rebuke, but I felt that this was not the time for fastidious reticence. Whether he wanted the information or not, I told him of Adela Glynde, as I had known her for fifteen years, and of Jocelyn Arley, as she had revealed herself in the few hours that we passed together on our way to Nateby. I quoted Nora Helmsley's contemptuous admission that, until her escapade of the night before, she had been (what Mrs. Reid would call) "virtuous". I spoke of Peter and Keith, recalling the fight which Stranger

must have seen ending when he ran to my assistance in the park.

"That was not an accident, then?," he enquired.

"They had not fallen into a pool? I was afraid . . .

Naturally I did not care to ask embarrassing questions . . ."

"I have told you," I said, "that, when I have met odd behaviour before, it has come from people of whom it might be expected. It was unexpected, it was incredible that those two men should be fighting with intent to kill. And, though Colyton is a changed man since the war, I should always be surprised to find him laying irregular siege to any woman's door. Punch Escott you know, perhaps better than I do . . ."

"I have known him, not all *my* life, but all *his*," Stranger put in. He smiled as he spoke; and I, remembering Punch's statement that they had met for the first time a week ago, prepared to catch him tripping. "Escott's life is written in his face," he explained.

I carried my plate to the side-table and helped myself to cheese. Could Stranger read my thoughts? In trying to trip him, it was I who had nearly been brought down.

"These are the people as I knew them till a few days ago," I said. "Of Miss Arley I know little more than you. We can see she's hardly more than a child . . ."

"She let fall," Stranger interrupted, "that she had a younger sister who was already married and the mother of two babies. From your knowledge of America," he continued to me, "you can say whether girls marry much younger than in this country."

"Whether they marry younger or not . . .," I began summarily.

"When a girl is old enough to love and marry, she is old enough to love without marrying."

"I cannot agree with that. Your spinster of thirty may with some justice maintain that she knows what she is about, that she will take all risks and that a religious service or a civil contract cannot make the difference between a state of grace and a state of sin. Your girl of twenty does not reason in that way. Curious she may be, but she is less curious than frightened. Her purity is more to her than her life. The idea of sin is overwhelming. Even if she could sin with safety . . ."

"But what if she denies that it is a sin?"

For answer I told Stranger that he should have posed his question to the first twenty girls at the ball overnight.

"The experience of the world is on my side," I asserted.

"The experience of this house is against you."

3

WAS there a note of triumph in his voice? Was he only scoring a legitimate debating-point? As I poured out my coffee, I studied his face, but it told me nothing. He was asking the professor's opinion on some matter; and his attitude and expression were disarmingly deferential.

"The experience of this house . . .," the professor repeated thoughtfully. "Isn't that what we have to explain? What has happened to make this house abnormal? Why has every one here changed in a night . . .?"

Stranger glanced quickly from the one to the other of us:

"Not every one."

I wondered if he was numbering his adversaries.

"No! A few of us remain steadfast," said the professor, "but how do you account for the others? They have reverted to nature . . ."

▲ "I assume that, for one reason or another, they were disappointed with the alternative they knew. Is that not a sufficient explanation, professor? Nature gave them the power to love, man imposed his limitations. Is it wonderful that they should weary of unnatural fetters? Had they been cast up on a desert island, nature would have asserted herself without waiting for a priest to pronounce his benediction. May they not feel that benedictions do not change the quality of an act? . . . I wonder if we ought to do anything about poor Mrs. Reid?"

I had long suspected that he was trying to escape; and this time the attempted bolt was unmistakable. I assured him that our hostess was in good keeping and reminded him that we were not living on a desert island, but in Northumberland, an hour from Newcastle. Within a week we should be dispersing north, south, east and west. It was one thing, I said, to revert to nature; quite another to abide with her. At this moment I did not doubt that the county was ringing with stories of scandal; sooner or later there would be new scandals if the others preached and practised that whatever was natural must also be right. In time, I reminded him, Miss Arley would be leaving Nateby. Would she return to America or would she cleave to Punch Escott? And where would Lady Escott, neglected when she was not being betrayed, find a place in the new world of nature? It might be natural for men and women to mate as freely, I said, as the beasts of the field, but it was also natural

for the beasts of the field to breed as freely as they mated. Man, who established society on the foundation of marriage, ordained that there was no place in society for the woman who bore children out of wedlock. It might be unnatural, it might be wrong; but in England and America, the two countries of chief interest to Miss Glynde and Miss Arley, the rule admitted of neither exception nor appeal.

"I presume these ladies have weighed the rival merits of natural and social life," said Stranger indifferently. "They cannot have the best of both."

"And, as this is not a desert island, I fear they will have the best of neither," said the professor. "Before it is too late, they must be brought back; but, before they can be brought back, we must know what possessed them to break their bars."

"Possessed?," repeated Stranger.

"I used the word in its strictest sense."

"And you think I can help you?"

Above the aquiline nose the dark eyebrows arched themselves in mild surprise. Was he amused by our coming to *him* for help? Was he diffidently hinting that, as we had known these others so much longer, he had best not interfere?

"If you agree with us," I said.

"I am not quite sure . . .," he began, watching with a slight frown as I lighted my cigar.

I threw away the match and turned in my chair till I was looking squarely into his brown, wide-open eyes:

"I believe that a spirit must have entered in and possessed people before they could change what we should have called, at other times, their essential nature."

For the second time Stranger looked from the one to the other of us; and I thought that his body stiffened as though he was putting himself on guard. The professor was now, without concealment, my ally; and, as we edged our chairs together, we must have seemed to be enclosing Stranger in a ring of antagonism. Was it imagination or did I detect once again, above the smell of tobacco and stale food, the elusive animal-scent which I was now always capturing and losing?

"A spirit?," Stranger repeated. "You mean a devil, like one of those which entered into the swine at Gadara?"

"Do you believe in such things?," I asked in my turn.

"I have certainly never met one," he laughed. "Is this not rather a . . . *desperate* explanation? . . ."

"Is this not a desperate state of things we have to explain?," asked the professor. "*I* do not believe in . . . devils. *I did* not, at least . . ."

His voice faltered and died away. We had sat until the short-lived December sun was setting; and its last low rays, stealing up Stranger's face, turned his brown eyes blood-red. The rest of the room was in shadow. As we ceased speaking, it sank into silence that was only punctuated faintly by the sound of deep breathing. Unnoticed by me, Punch had fallen forward and was sleeping with his head on his arms. Peter twitched from time to time like a dog with disturbing dreams. I heard a yawn from an unexpected quarter and discovered for the first time that Keith was sprawling on the floor, half under the table by Punch's side.

"Are these men or animals?," I challenged Stranger.

"You know their habits better than I do! But, when you speak of spirits, you do not explain why some are

attacked, while others, apparently, are left unmolested. You yourself, the professor . . .”

“It is capable of explanation,” I answered.

Then I paused to pursue my own thoughts for a while. In one of De la Mare's stories, a man in a state of weak physical resistance falls asleep in a grave-yard and wakes to find that his body has been invaded by a spirit not his own. In hypnosis the personality of the sleeper, in yielding to suggestion, changes its essence. How much greater was the change I might expect when a body, not weakly resisting, nor feebly acquiescing, but actively demanding and willing, delivered itself to the spirit of its choice!

“It's capable of explanation,” I repeated. “If you say that some of us welcomed the spirit and others repelled . . .”

Stranger nodded to shew that he understood and then very slowly shrugged his shoulders. Though he made no comment, I was convinced that he was saying: “If they made their choice freely, who are you to reverse it?” I sat waiting for him to put the question into words and seeking an answer. For the first time since Jack Sebright's death, Adela was complete, satisfied and happy. For the first time since the war, Peter was composed and at peace. It might be the composure of a brute-beast, but was it to be more despised than the nerve-wracked state in which he drank himself insensible? We talked of Adela and the others as “slipping away”; would they thank us if we dragged them back to a life of frustration and pretence? Stranger himself had explained their reversion to nature by saying that they were presumably tired of the alternative. I realized with a start that I had not yet put to myself the case for obeying natural impulses.

"When did the change take place?," Stranger asked. "Or, rather, when did you notice it first?"

"On the night we all arrived here. We were talking of the artificial lives we all led . . ."—I looked up sharply in the hope of catching him off his guard—"compared with life in the days when . . . Pan ruled!"

The eyes that were looking into mine did not waver. The only movement came from the professor, who knocked over a wine-glass. While he stooped to pick up the pieces, Stranger and I continued to stare at each other; and, though his expression did not change, I could feel the muscles of my face growing rigid. Had he the power to undermine my will too? Already he had stolen Enid's confidence; I was telling myself that the case for nature had not yet been stated. . . .

Our silent duel ended when, without taking his eyes off mine, he repeated wonderingly:

"*Pan*? When people talk of Pan, what picture do they make of him?"

Of a sudden I discovered that I must stir myself. The heat of this dark room was making me drowsy. Stranger's liquid, low voice had a spell in it. And, no longer challenging him, I felt he was challenging me to look anywhere but into his eyes if I dared.

"Any one having a liqueur?," I asked.

And, standing up, I switched on the lights.

4

By myself at the side-board, with a dozen sconces flooding the room and shining on two tweed-suited men at a disordered table, I felt my assurance returning.

"We divided into opposing schools," I said. "The professor—from knowledge—and I—from instinct—inclined to the view that a return to nature was a return to savagery. Mrs. Shapland agreed with us. My wife would have been on our side if we had consulted her." I returned with my brandy and gave him a moment to digest the names. "The others. . . . The others embraced a conception of liberty and ease which I confess I could not visualize. They viewed the natural life without considering whether it could be carried on in the midst of so-called civilization. They viewed only a part of the natural life, not dreaming that their freedom from the restraints to which civilization is exposed might be purchased at the price of penalties from which civilization is exempt. The fight which you and I interrupted the other evening was 'natural' enough, but I doubt if those who voted that night for nature, Pan, Arcady . . ."

"You took a vote?," Stranger interrupted. "*Literally?*"

I described our first night in the castle until the moment when the doors of the hall were thrown open. Beginning on a note of whimsy, I soon realized that Stranger's indulgent smile was forcing me to bring a charge. He, I make no doubt, realized it, too, and interrupted me once to protest ruefully that everything had apparently been well until he and Punch Escott arrived.

"To my thinking," I said, "the harm had been done by then. If a spirit was waiting to take possession, all had been made ready to receive him."

I described the moment's darkness in the hall; and Stranger asked, with a hint of mockery, whether we had thought a "judgement" was descending on the blasphemers:

"The devil coming to claim his own, I mean?"

"As I wasn't expecting to see the devil . . .," I began.

"You realized that Pan was answering an invocation."

I blew a cloud of smoke and said nothing. How well I had succeeded, it was impossible to say, but I had given all the art and conviction of which I am capable to recreating the scene in the hall on that first night. He should know all that I knew, all that I suspected. What he made of it I neither feared nor cared!

And yet was I not safeguarding myself the whole time? If, like Mrs. Shapland, he asked whether I had mistaken one of my fellow-guests for a "heathen deity", I should answer weakly that I was trying to amuse him with a dramatic coincidence.

Leaving him to brood over the picture I had painted, I tried to sketch from imagination a scene that was taking place outside the castle while we were arguing within. At one point on their journey, Punch had told us, Stranger wanted to turn back. I had a vision of endless moorland, now grey, now black, with a spread fan of dazzling light pointing to Nateby and drawing ever nearer. I saw the moving fan stop. Stranger had signalled to the driver and was trying to rouse Punch from sleep. "*I cannot come,*" he was saying: "*there is no welcome for me here.*" Faint as a sigh, yet louder than the clash of their voices and the muffled beat of the engines I heard on the wings of the wind a muttered "*Vicisti, Silvane*". A moment later, the white fan moved forward again, rising for an instant to brush the walls of the castle and to vanish through the mullioned windows of the hall before the car swung into the courtyard.

"What did you think?," Stranger asked me.

"I didn't think of anything at the time. Afterwards, when I needed an explanation of things I could not understand, I did begin to wonder. . . . Later still, I remember, some one asked if perhaps those who had given the invitation were being taken at their word."

I was incapable of saying more. There are convictions that no one can put into words; and there are fantastic suspicions that dissipate themselves in the moment that they are formulated. Stranger was still smiling; and I dreaded his next question or comment. His silence began to unnerve me more than his smile; and the brown eyes, holding mine unwaveringly, made me feel that my head was of glass.

"And which of us did you take to be Pan?"

For an instant he turned his head to glance down the table at Punch. In that instant I wrenched myself free of his eyes and stood up to throw my cigar away. I struggled to laugh. I too looked down the table. I pretended not to see that the professor's face was white and glistening.

"Oh, well," I said at last, "to judge by the conventional representations of Pan, I should hardly mistake Punch for him,"

"Then I am to have that honour?," asked Stranger.

He had ceased to smile; and his face seemed to darken with fatigue or pain. Glancing at my coffee-cup, he pushed his chair back from the table.

"I have never visualized Pan in modern dress," I said. "Without the pipes and the horns . . ."

"And the cloven hoof," said Stranger.

I felt my heart hammering. I could not remember what I was trying to say.

"All that," I went on, breathlessly: and then I stopped as I found his eyes once more on mine, looking at me, looking through me.

"Oughtn't we to let the servants clear away?," he asked. "I don't know if any one's inclined to have a walk . . . You rest in the afternoon as a rule, don't you? I was sorry to hear from your wife that you'd been laid up with influenza. Not quite shaken it off yet, I understand?"

"I'm all right again now," I said.

He gave me another of his assured, penetrating glances, and I realized that he was treating me as though I were not responsible for what I said. He must shew me, though, that he knew I was not responsible. This allusion to my illness could only mean that he was willing to be patient with me so long as I did not expect to have my words regarded seriously. For several moments I was reft of speech; and I was thinking only how I could establish my sanity beyond cavil when the professor came unexpectedly to my rescue:

"The cloven hoof we could really supply."

5

THE red-brown eyes swung slowly from my face to the professor's.

"Yes?," Stranger enquired with polite interest.

"Yes!," affirmed the professor. "At least, it seemed like that. A most curious thing . . . You, I understand, were present for the last rounds of the fight between our somnolent friends yonder. I only heard about it next day, when I was taken to see what in my schoolboy-days I should have called 'the milling ground'. A *most*

curious thing! Perhaps you have been back there to inspect the marks? There is a track in the mud . . . a track that you might think had been left by a man leading a horse. You see a hoof-mark; and you see the print of a boot. You think nothing more of it. Then, perhaps, you are struck by the fact that there are but two prints, alternating: one hoof, one boot. You say it could not be a man leading a horse: where are the other three hooves, the other foot? These were the marks of one creature . . . and a creature that stepped alternately with a foot and a hoof. I am in earnest, Mr. Stranger. I did not see these marks when they were first observed, but I returned on my own account to examine them. No doubt of any kind! There was a perfection of rhythm, a regularity of spacing that convinced me! *Two* rhythms, perhaps I should say: a short spacing, where the creature walked, and a longer, where he ran. I stared, I rubbed my eyes! And then—to make my point—I observed something more remarkable still. This hoof-print . . . It was not, I found upon examination, the print of a horse. You know well enough the elliptical curve of a horse's hoof! This impression was splayed somewhat, . . . splayed and broken. The hoof, I decided, was cloven. . . . And then I remembered that this cloven hoof was not one of four. It was one of two. And the other foot, moving in perfect rhythm, was a man's. It was the greatest shock I have ever experienced! Do you wonder? I do not understand it yet. Explanations have been offered; but, as our friend here will tell you, I prefer to suspend judgement. That day I sat down on a stone and tried to read some light into it all. I had heard of the fight; I had heard how it was interrupted. You, I was told,

had come running from the lodge on the high road; and the marks—these amazing marks of some creature with one human foot and one cloven hoof—came . . . they came . . .”

“From the lodge?,” asked Stranger.

Then he paused and flung his head back in a paroxysm of noiseless laughter. If he had read our thoughts and prompted our lumbering hints and questions, he could not have been consumed by more devilish merriment at our falling into his trap. The laughter continued, uncannily, without a sound, as though plate-glass separated us or I had become suddenly stone-deaf. The professor, unable to bear it longer, stood up. Still the Stranger laughed. I pushed back my chair; and he ceased laughing as suddenly as he had begun.

“May we not share your joke?,” the professor enquired stiffly.

“My joke? If you have tears, prepare to shed them now! If you have forgiveness, professor, prepare to offer it . . . and to me. I am committing the only social crime: I am ruining a good story. If only you had stopped in time, like our friend here! If you had said at your climax, like that man in the Barrie play, ‘*Shall we join the ladies?*’ . . . ! Why, you would have had a tale to match the one we have already heard: of the latter-day contest between god and the oldest god of all; the invocation of Pan, the dimmed light, the opening door . . . Alas! I must be material! Those foot-prints . . . Or foot-and-hoof prints. They are so unromantically explained. I . . . You must forgive me: one does not enjoy talking of these things. The discomfort and sometimes the pain, the *acute* pain . . . When I get the opportunity, I surreptitiously kick off my

shoe. And, as I told our friend the other day, whenever I can, I walk barefoot. Those foot-prints . . . They are easily, too easily explained. If you look . . . But this is intolerable! I have no right to ask you! Like that man in the play, let me say '*Shall we join the ladies?*' My shoe . . .? Thank you! Now, we have wandered rather far from our first theme: what is it, precisely, that you think I can do to help you?" . . .

CHAPTER TWELVE

A BRAND TO BE PLUCKED FROM THE BURNING

I

By tea-time our hostess had recovered sufficiently to send for me and make known her will:

"The Helmsleys won't go," she informed me coldly, holding out a pencilled scrawl. "The others just don't pay any attention. So I shall stay here till they do. I feel bad to be neglecting you and the Shaplands. I want to have all *you* stay, but I can't let up on what I've said. Now, see, there must be *somebody* to give orders and arrange things. I ask you, Mr. Kingsbury, because I've tried you out; and, believe me or believe me not, I can't do with any more shocks and worries."

"But, you remember, I must get back to London," I said.

To be frank, I had no hope of escaping; but, by threatening to leave, I relied on securing my own terms if I stayed on. The conversation after luncheon, if it taught me nothing else, had at least convinced me that I could not meet Stranger again. I did not mind his thinking me mad, I did not resent his looking through me as though he were reading my thoughts; what I could

not tolerate was his triumphant mockery. "*Shall we join the ladies?*" His laugh, as he said it, was devilish. And he was content to say that and no more. Looking down from the gallery, I had seen him standing with his legs apart and his hands on his hips, opposite the little professor. He was laughing again, this time aloud; and, as he threw his head back, the light of the fire—like that last gleam of sunshine an hour earlier—turned his big eyes from brown to red. Though he laughed, I felt that he was distorted with anger; and, though I stood in no fear of his anger, I could not face his unexplained derision. The professor, fidgeting and out of countenance, had muttered some excuse and scurried into the library, leaving his dignity to take care of itself. Alone in the hall, Stranger had then thrown up his head like a baying dog. "Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho!" As he limped to the door his laughter became gradually fainter, dying away as he disappeared into the dusk of the courtyard.

If I consented to pass another night in this accursed house, it would be on condition that Enid and I dined in our rooms and were not required to face this devil's mockery.

"I count on you," Mrs. Reid answered; and I felt that, when she needed to rely on other people, she was become a vastly different woman from the one I had met—was it only a week ago?—at Escott's house in London. Gone was the ambitious hostess; gone the brisk social manager, gone the free thinker and bold speaker. In their place stood an ignorant and frightened woman in the grip of a waking nightmare.

"Beasts . . . Wild beasts . . ." she murmured to herself. "That's what they are! Just wild beasts."

While she handed the wild beasts over to my keeping,

I looked vainly for a single trait that would link the woman who had collected this ghastly party to the one who was trying to disperse it. If Adela could be trusted, this was the authentic Henrietta Reid, purged of her affectations: the finished portrait of the woman who had sketched herself to me as she decorated the chapel with vases of chrysanthemums and talked of her childhood in a pioneer town of the Middle West. The archness and intellectual pretentiousness were only so many disguises for a natural modesty and a natural timidity of which—for some reason—she had hitherto been ashamed. I wish I had known more of her history. Was she, by breeding and training, heir to the stern-eyed, thin-lipped puritanism that had peopled the New England states? Was she a woman hypocritically addicted to a life of secret virtue?

In the absence of knowledge, I made up a story about her, laying the scene of my first chapter in a small provincial town where a young girl of stubborn conviction and pliant will assisted at an unending battle between inherited Calvinism and acquired worldliness. I saw her being led to acts of blameless, but senseless, daring, in equal fear of her conscience and of her friends' contempt for conscience. I saw her, shocked and fascinated by the laxity of great cities, struggling in agony to reconcile present practice and early precept. With her lips at least she had no doubt been taught by New York to despise her provincial nest. In Paris and London she was taught by her countrywomen to despise New York. Giving her no time to think or argue, they convinced her, I felt sure, that the amenities of social life had not yet stretched beyond Europe: she must make her home in England or France or Italy; and, as she had neither desire nor opportunity for work of another kind, she must

devote her wealth and her energy to winning social preeminence.

As though I had heard her first misgivings, I could imagine the renewed conflict between Calvinism and worldliness, maintained now against an international background; I could picture the good-natured friend, half a lap in advance of her, who turned to explain that if she meant to succeed, she must abandon her nursery prejudices; I did not doubt that she had given the same advice to Jocelyn Arley. And so, miserably and against her better judgement, there had been evolved the woman whom I took into dinner at Punch Escott's: a woman who said things she did not mean, a woman who did things she did not like, a woman who affected passions she did not feel. Projecting my story into the future, I could fancy her descending obstinately and reluctantly to ever more joyless depths. The good-natured friend would persuade her to a more active part in the orgies which at present she arranged for others. The end I had not the imagination to see.

And all the time she was startled and shocked. If the vulgarity of her display escaped her, she was alive to the emptiness of it; and, when she contrasted her present lax grandeur with the strictness and simplicity of her childhood, the gradual degeneration of her own moral tissues frightened her. Free of the friends and advisers whom she lacked strength to resist, she would probably have closed her houses, sent her raffish guests packing and settled again in the town where she had been born and where—for the first time since childhood—her conscience might have left her in peace. That, unless I totally misread her, was the authentic Henrietta Reid. And, if I believed in the efficacy of prayer, I should have to say

that her prayers for freedom to follow her natural instincts had been most surprisingly answered.

"I'll do whatever I can," I promised, "but wouldn't it really be best to break the whole party up? Say you're very sorry . . ."

"But they stay put! They don't seem to get me! As if they'd been doping."

I looked at Enid. She it was who had said that Adela seemed to have strayed into a world of her own, from which she could hardly force herself to return. The night before, standing at the door of the ball-room, I had felt that, though they spoke the same language and wore the same clothes, Nora Helmsley and Jocelyn Arley had nothing in common with the men who talked and danced with them; they felt the incongruity themselves and hurried impatiently from an unnatural and exasperating scene. They were slipping farther and farther from us.

"What's come over them?", Mrs. Reid asked pitiously. "Jocelyn? *Jocelyn!* . . ."

I strolled to the window and looked down on the courtyard. The doors were open; and in the light from the hall I saw Stranger sitting in his favourite place, scattering crumbs to a circle of birds which he had coaxed down from their nesting-places. Jocelyn went up to him, as I watched, and the two walked away in the direction of the park.

"You can't suggest any explanation?," I asked.

"They're crazy," Mrs. Reid declared. "Why, if you'd known Jocelyn back home . . . That awful man Lord Escott. It were better that a mill-stone were tied about his neck . . ."

"Isn't Escott a fellow-victim in the same epidemic? I wonder if you remember our conversation on the first

night. We were talking of god and nature: some of you said that, if you had your choice between Christ and Pan, you would choose Pan . . . ”

“I oughtn’t to have said that,” Mrs. Reid interrupted. “It was blasphemy, but I thought it sounded smart.”

“You voted for nature. These people whom you call mad excuse themselves by saying that what they have done is ‘natural’. Can it be that nature came at your summons?”

2

MRS. REID frowned for a moment in perplexity.

“N-nature?,” she stammered. “What . . . what d’you mean?”

“Is there still a god of nature? You invoked him. Can he have heard your invocation? The words were hardly spoken before . . . ”

“Lord Escott and his friend,” she broke in.

“Hardly a friend. We call him Stranger, but Escott himself doesn’t know if that’s his name. Whoever he is . . . *whatever* he is, the atmosphere changed as he came in . . . ”

Already pale, Mrs. Reid’s face seemed to turn grey. She sprang to her feet, shying away from me as though I and not she had conjured up a spirit.

“*Whatever* he is? . . . ,” she gasped.

“I don’t know, you see. At one moment I’d have told you that Pan himself, with a cloven hoof, was in this house . . . ”

“A cloven hoof? What are you saying?”

“I’ve seen the marks; and I’ve seen the way that the spirit of Pan has taken possession of these others. I thought I was mad myself till Enid, first, and then the

professor came to share my madness. I don't know what to think. I've been talking to this Stranger. I hinted all I dared; and he guessed all that I was afraid to hint. He laughed. He asked whether Escott or he was supposed to be Pan. He kicked off his shoe and offered to shew . . . whatever he had to shew. What I believe now I can't tell you."

Beyond the castle I caught sight of the chapel. The windows shone softly red and blue; and an occasional shadow hovered across them. Somebody, I presumed, was putting fresh water in the vases; and I fell to thinking of the strange professions of faith which had been made within those walls since the day when Roman workmen fitted together the pieces of that tessellated pavement. They, I dared swear, had no more doubt that Pan existed than their mediaeval successors that winged angels and horned devils existed. In the belt of woods from which a pagan had heard the pipes of Pan there still stood a cross to mark where Christians had burned witches for trafficking with Satan.

One wall of the chapel, I noticed, would soon need to be buttressed. I wondered if the masons of the future would describe a strange era of materialism and unbelief when mankind, swinging in violent reaction from its earlier credulity, refused to admit the existence of anything that could not be proved.

"Not so very many years ago," I continued, "I shouldn't have doubted. The world still believed in magic; but spirits and ghosts and gods and devils have rather gone out of fashion. I asked myself last night what those red-faced, hard-headed fox-hunters would think if I told them that Pan was abroad once more."

I turned from the window and found Mrs. Reid standing with one hand pressed to her heart. Her lips were moving, but I heard no sound till she gasped out "*Pan?*" Over my shoulder she stared at the shut door as though she expected to see Pan bursting in to claim her.

"Lord, have mercy, have mercy on me a sinner!," she cried. Then dropping on her knees, she lifted her hands above her head. "I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth . . ." She swayed; and Enid stepped forward to catch her. ". . . And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, Our Lord. I believe, I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life! I believe! I believe! I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins! And I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen."

Opening her eyes, she looked once more at the door and drew herself slowly to her feet.

"You should do what I've done," she whispered to me.

"I can't."

"Aren't you a believer?"

"A week ago I believed in nothing. There are moments now when I believe in everything. When I find the spirit of Pan abroad . . ."

"There is no Pan!," she cried.

"I have seen the prints of his hoof."

"That was not Pan." Her eyes told me who it was that, to her thinking, had printed a cloven hoof-mark wherever he went. "Where's Jocelyn?"

"She went out with Stranger," I said.

"Oh, God! We must follow them! We *can* save *her*. We must. Come down with me! Did you

see which way they went? Oh, don't waste time arguing!"

If I obeyed without further remonstrance, this was because Mrs. Reid seemed in danger of becoming hysterical again. With a sense of amazing futility, Enid and I caught up our coats and hurried at the heels of our distracted hostess into the park. We did not have far to go. By the light of the moon I saw two figures walking towards the Wall; as we hailed them, they turned. Then the girl came to meet us, stepping listlessly, as though she were half-asleep. The man continued on his way alone. I may have imagined the sound, but I thought I heard a laugh.

"Jocelyn!" cried Mrs. Reid.

"We've been looking at the marks," the girl drawled. "Did you discover it all for yourself? I think it's wonderful of you."

"Did I discover all what?," I asked.

She nodded in the direction of Stranger's disappearing back.

"About him."

"He's been telling you? I don't think I can say I've made any discovery. I don't know. I supplied an explanation . . ."

The twigs which I had planted two days before still marked the track by which Stranger had come running from the lodge. Mrs. Reid went forward with Enid and pored over the prints. They called to me for matches; and I heard a groan as the first flared for an instant over the trampled ground.

"Did Stranger make any comment?," I asked.

"He told me what you'd said; and then he asked me what I thought of it."

"What did you say?"

"It hadn't occurred to me before. Have you explained to Henrietta? She doesn't understand yet. I did my best to make her see it this morning, but she simply shut her ears."

The others were still exploring the ground; and I led the way back to the house on the chance of hearing more from the girl than Mrs. Reid would let her say.

"You believe that this person we call Stranger . . .," I began.

"I know it. . . . I'm so happy! I know I was right now," she returned drowsily.

"And the others?"

"I don't know anything about them. Aren't they happy too? You *must* talk to Henrietta. She still thinks as I did once. D'you know, until this week I never let a man kiss me, though I *wanted* to be kissed? Desperately! It was only natural, wasn't it? But I was always brought up to think that, when a thing was natural, it was bound to be wrong . . ."

"And you don't think that any more?"

"How can I? Is it wrong to sleep when you're tired?"

"But you're not living in a world of pure nature! May I ask what is going to happen when you leave here?"

"Punch will take me with him."

"You are probably aware that he is already married. You will learn, if you do not know it already, that the world outside will not listen to talk about natural laws; it will excommunicate you publicly and persecute you privately; it will say, in a horrible phrase, that you are living in sin and it will avoid you as it avoids a leper . . ."

"I used to believe in sin once," the girl murmured. "What's Henrietta doing? Isn't she coming with us?"

Looking round, I saw Mrs. Reid once more on her knees. The bent head might still be bowed over Stranger's footprints, but I fancied that she was kneeling in prayer. The night was very still; and, though the limping figure had disappeared from sight, I felt that we were being watched. Was she praying that the spirit which she had invited to this place should be driven out?

"What's Henrietta *doing?*," the girl repeated, this time with waning patience. "I'm cold."

"Let me take you back to the house."

"But she wants me. She's calling me." I listened, but could hear no sound. "There!"

"I heard nothing."

"You must be deaf! *There!* Now some one else! What do they want with me? I'm not going to her, anyway. And I'm not going back to the house. Look at that moon! And all the stars! I'm going to stay out here all night." She bent to the ground and sniffed the moist earth. "Why does Henrietta try to spoil things when she knows I'm happy? Nature . . ."

"What will happen to you," I asked, "when you go forth into a world that is not yet governed by nature's code?"

"I really haven't thought. . . . I don't know why anything should happen. I don't know why I should ever go away from here. Except that Henrietta won't leave me alone. First of all she ordered me out of the house; and now she's trying to drag me back into it. What's she doing?"

"I think she's praying for you," I answered.

"*Praying?* . . . Oh, there's Punch!"

Darting from my side, she ran up the drive and left me trembling and cold from the frankness of her avowal. She had spoken as I imagined Trilby must have spoken when she lived under Svengali's spell. The brain was functioning normally; she could argue, making and taking her points; she expressed herself in conventional language. If I had been walking with a somnambulist, however, or talking with a woman in a trance, I could not have felt more remote.

I recalled that Mrs. Reid had brought us out there to "rescue" the child. . . .

Was it the barking of a dog, or did I hear a deep "ho, ho, ho, ho, ho"? I spun round, but any one of a thousand trees might be screening the Stranger. And he had every right to laugh. If he was a man, he could laugh at the monstrous fancy I had put before him that afternoon; if he was less or more than a man, he could laugh at Mrs. Reid's fatuous prayers. Herself she might have extricated, from her his spell was cast off; but she could not remove it from the others without their help. And no help was coming from those who had rejected their new gods for the oldest god of all. The child whom we had come to rescue was standing arm-in-arm with the sot who had defiled her; and the sot was telling a story that travelled to me in disjointed fragments, while she patted his hand.

I could not make out whether Punch was narrating a dream or a fancied experience; and at first I was uncertain whether he was speaking in jest or earnest. He had come out, he was saying, because "she" would not leave him alone. Wherever he went, "she" was always drifting to his side and trying to address him. "She" had come into the dining-room; and he had pitched a decanter

at "her". What was the good of that? The decanter had passed through "her"; and, when he looked down, it was once more at his elbow.

"But I don't understand!," Jocelyn exclaimed, as I came up to them. "Who is she?"

"You'd like know, wouldn't you?," asked Punch, with what I took to be rather a ghastly attempt at facetiousness. "*You'd* like know. *I'd* like know. *Everybody'd* like know. And another thing I'd like know is why she won't leave me 'lone. I asked her. 'Why won't you leave me 'lone?,' I said. She wouldn't answer. I asked her who she was, but she wouldn't tell me. There was a girl made fool of herself about me once. Before your time, my dear, before your time. Did herself in. They tried make out was *my* fault. I thought first . . . 'Pull that damned veil off,' I said, 'and let's have a look.' You can't say fairer than that, can you? 'Pull it off, my beauty,' I said. And she did." I still could not determine whether this was a nightmare or an adventure, but I noticed that Punch's voice had become shrill with horror. "She did," he repeated, "and then you could see at once why she was so bashful. She had no face, my dear, no kind of face, no face at all! Why won't she leave me 'lone?"

The shrill voice broke suddenly; and I heard a long-drawn sob. Mrs. Reid hurried to my side, demanding what was the matter now. I told her that I thought Lord Escott was unwell and that I would go to his assistance if she would take the others away.

Then I addressed myself to the task of soothing or dominating a man who, so far as I could judge, was tottering on the verge of *delirium tremens*.

3

I SPENT the night on a sofa in his room and have but a fragmentary idea of what was happening in any other part of the castle. The Shaplands, I was told, had dinner in their rooms, Enid in hers. I believe that Jocelyn was locked into the house and that Mrs. Reid passed the evening in prayer. I do not know what happened to Adela or the Helmsleys; and I never heard when the Stranger returned from his lone prowling in the park.

As soon as my patient was asleep, I pulled the curtains apart and seated myself in a window from which I could command the drive to the Wall. The contest in which I had been engaging for Punch's sanity was being reproduced, I felt, on a grander scale in the contest which Mrs. Reid was carrying on for the soul of Jocelyn Arley. I have sat by more than one death-bed and have fancied more than once that the pale lips of the dying whispered a prayer for the strong will of the living to help them. When this girl listened to voices that were calling her in opposite directions, I felt that her own will was paralysed and that she was offering herself to whichever called the louder.

At the moment I surmised that the Stranger's attack had been met; perhaps it was already being thrown back. Mrs. Reid was free of his domination; my wife no longer predicted that she would be "the next to go". The professor, Mrs. Shapland and I were hurling the weight of our wills on the same side. The forces ranged against us were disunited: so long as we did not interfere with them, Adela and the Helmsleys and Peter would not

interfere with us or with one another. Punch was incapacitated for fighting; our effort was directed against the Stranger alone.

Was this why he lingered in the park? Was he telling himself that his welcome had been withdrawn?

When my dinner was brought me, I asked whether Mr. Stranger had returned. I was told that the man who laid out his clothes had been three times to his room, but that he was not yet come in. On the chance of finding what impression he had left on the servants, I said that I hoped he had not lost his way: did he know this part of Northumberland? Had he stayed at Nateby before? The footman could not enlighten me: Mr. Stranger was a very quiet gentleman, who seldom said more than "good morning" or "good evening" to any one.

I ate my dinner and made myself a bed of two armchairs. In twenty-four hours, I told myself, I should be back in London. I should also be back in the twentieth century. My friends would ask me how we had enjoyed ourselves; Lady Dennison would want to know whether Nateby had changed under the rule of Mrs. Reid. What should I say? That the place had changed out of recognition or that I had changed from a sceptic to a believer in fables that a child would reject? At some period of this endless night I dropped into uneasy sleep and dreamed that I was again disputing with Stranger, who stood as I had seen him the afternoon before, with his hands on his hips, laughing down at me.

"So you believe at last !," he mocked me. *"Ho, ho, ho ! You resisted as long as you could, but in the end you succumbed. Why did you resist? If you believe in one*

god, you can believe in many. If you believe in Jehovah, you must believe in the Baal whom he overcame. If you believe in Christ, you must believe in the devil whom he resisted. You must believe in fairies and worlocks, in the spirits of streams and trees. Only in me do you refuse to believe? You will refuse no longer. Ho, ho, ho! Ho, ho, ho!"

In my dream I bowed my head and confessed that I believed. The mocking laughter swelled to a roar:

"Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho! The great god Pan at a Christmas party! It was in the second year of the war that I was wounded: a machine-gun bullet that splintered the bones so that my foot had to be amputated . . ."

Before I could answer, the laughter swelled again; and the menacing figure seemed to grow in stature till I stood only at the level of its waist, then of its knees, then of its ankles:

"Out of fashion? Ho, ho, ho! The Devil's Bridge and the Devil's Punchbowl are still fashionable, but the Devil himself, you say? Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho!"

I woke to find myself bathed in sweat and sprang up to turn on the lights. My patient lay as if he had been pole-axed; the fire was out; and three more hours must pass before I could hope for daylight. I filled a pipe and returned to the window-seat, where I remained staring at the moon-lit park until Punch began to move in his sleep. Then I rang for the night-watchman and ordered hot coffee to be prepared while I shaved and bathed.

By the time I came back, Punch was awake. He looked mortally sick; and his face had lost all sign of

human understanding. I gave him strong black coffee and waited while memory and intelligence worked slowly free from the paralysis of the bromide I had given him. He required to be told where he was and how he had come thither; though he pretended to recognize me, he refrained from giving me a name; and he accepted humbly and without question my unflatteringly blunt explanation of his state.

"I'm going to cut it right out," he announced with painful difficulty in controlling his articulation. "*Anno domini*, I suppose. I thought I could carry my whack, but it seems I can't. They do you too well here; and I must have taken more than I realized." His mind seemed to wander and he stared vacantly about the room as though he were looking for some one. "You didn't notice anything odd *before* yesterday or whenever it was? My head's in such a muddle that I can't remember what's been happening. There's a girl . . . I've been mixed up with a girl in some way. I didn't bring her here, did I? I've never done a thing like that before. It would be too awful."

"The only person you brought here was Stranger," I answered.

"Stranger? Oh, the lame feller! I remember him."

I sat down and lighted a cigarette to counteract the reek of stale whiskey that always hung about Punch Escott's clothes and person.

"You don't remember where you picked him up or anything about him?," I asked.

"I met him somewhere. . . . I believe he was staying with me. . . . It'll come back to me. Who's the girl? An attractive little thing, I thought," he added with a flicker of his old animalism.

"Far too attractive. She's a young American with unusual views on morality. She has singled you out . . ."

His fatuous grin shewed me that I must express my meaning more clearly. "She has paid you the compliment of taking you as her lover . . ."

The grin faded slowly.

"Hang it all," Punch protested soberly. "You oughtn't to say things like that, old boy. It's rough on the girl."

"The consequences are likely to be much more rough, but we shall do no good by discussing that now. I have her word for the facts . . ."

"She told you? M'well, I thought she was a funny bit of goods when I first met her. Not what you'd call backward in coming forward, old boy. She must have seen life a bit in her time. And then to tell you about it!"

"She'd not 'seen life', as you call it, before she came here. If this is 'life', you're responsible for shewing it to her. I don't say you're any more to blame than she is: an epidemic of insanity has been running through this house. This was your contribution to it."

For some moments, I fancy, he still thought I was jesting, but gradually my tone or expression convinced him. Pulling himself slowly upright in bed he stared at me in horror.

"My God!" he gasped. "You don't *mean* this, old boy? A young girl . . . But I'd never met her before . . . It's not true! . . . I'm no saint, old boy, but there are *some* things . . . What the devil are you driving at?"

"Don't excite yourself," I urged.

"What's the good of saying that? Was she drunk

too? If not, it's the sin for which there's no forgiveness . . ."

"You believe in sin? She doesn't. She says that if a thing's natural . . ."

"My God!" said Punch with twitching lips. "My God! Where is she?"

I was about to tell him that he was in no state to see any one else when I heard a tap, followed by Jocelyn's voice enquiring whether she might come in. Before I could reach the door, she was in the room and had vaulted on to the foot of the bed, where she sat swinging her feet. She was in rags, with scratched legs and bleeding hands. "They" had locked her door, she told us, and she had climbed out of the window as soon as daylight came. Her hair was full of twigs; and through the rents in her tattered nightgown I could see black and yellow bruises on her white skin. I threw a blanket round her shoulders. Before accepting it, she crumpled her rags into a ball and tossed them into the fire, standing before us naked and unashamed. Punch looked at her once and covered his face. I warned her not to catch cold. She draped herself in the blanket and dropped cross-legged in front of the fire.

4

THERE I left her. Unless she was beyond the reach of human aid, Punch was the only person, I felt, who could lead her back to sanity. I wandered into the park, walking in a half-trance. At some point I fell into conversation with an old postman whom I had known in Harry Dennison's time; at another I remember meeting a group of men who were dragging a young fir-tree towards the house; they touched their caps and commented that

the weather was "seasonable". I remember, too, my surprise at realizing that this was Christmas Eve.

What, I wondered, was Punch Escott saying to little Jocelyn Arley? What was she saying to him? For the present at least the spell was broken; and Punch was thinking and behaving normally. How were Adela and Peter employing their time? What would they think, how would they act, when they too awoke, tremulous and shaken, like Punch? And the man we had agreed to call "Mr. Stranger"?

My musings were interrupted by a sound of running feet; and I turned to find Stranger himself trotting in my tracks. Remembering my dreams, I felt my heart quickening its beat. So far as the naked eye could reach, we were alone; and, as I gripped my stick, I fancied that I caught him smiling. Were he man or god or devil, I could do nothing against him. Had I not seen him plucking with one hand two men of his own size and weight from a bog-hole? He was in his own kingdom here; and, if he wanted to make an end of me, he had only to stampede the highland cattle and leave me a gored and trampled corpse. I measured the distance to the coppice behind which the foresters had disappeared with their fir-tree: they might protect me from the attack of a man or from the charge of an infuriated herd, but, if I were fighting with a devil, they could not help me.

"Did you call?," I asked.

"I want you," Stranger answered; and I braced myself to resist him. "We didn't really finish our conversation yesterday. I was wondering if it wouldn't really make things easier for Mrs. Reid if the party were a little bit reduced in size."

He spoke diffidently; and, as though he had possessed himself of my memory and will, I forgot my fancies of the night before and saw him as at our first meeting, when he shyly asked me to tell him about our fellow-guests.

"I don't quite follow," I said. "Mrs. Reid has definitely asked certain people to leave the house; and they've no less definitely refused."

"You mean the Helmsleys? I wasn't thinking of them. I want you to be absolutely candid with me, Kingsbury. Everything ran quite smoothly up to the point when Escott and I came on the scene (I'll tell you frankly that I didn't want to come!). I'm making no complaint! No one could do more to make me feel at home than you and your wife and the Shaplands, but I'm not sure that Mrs. Reid is quite at ease with me. Like most shy people I'm rather sensitive; and perhaps I suspect an attack where none is intended. I had a feeling yesterday that your delicious little fantasy might be read as a parable. People, you said, had been behaving so oddly since the night I arrived that you really thought a devil had entered into them. I beg your pardon! It was Pan, not a devil. And you produced chapter and verse. Will you assure my very simple mind that there was no hidden meaning in what you said? You didn't wish to convey that *I'd* cast a blight or introduced an uncomfortable atmosphere? Or did you?," he demanded as I hesitated.

I could not speak the truth; and no lie that I could tell would be convincing.

"My *dear* Stranger!," I laughed.

"Your word of honour?," he persisted. "If I thought I'd spoilt this party, I'd pack my bag and disappear

before any one had time to miss me. You don't hold *me* responsible?"

Why was he talking like this? Did he feel that I controlled the tide of animosity that was rising against him? Was he resolved to wring from me the welcome that I had been the first to withhold? Or was he paying a compliment to my greater experience?

"No," I said.

And it was "no" I meant, though I realized I had been thinking "yes" a moment before and should doubtless think and say "yes" a moment later, agreeing always with the last speaker. When Punch Escott talked of the sin for which there was no forgiveness, I was ready to believe in an incarnate spirit of evil; when Jocelyn professed allegiance to nature, I was prepared to say that Pan was come again; but, when I found myself walking back to luncheon with my fellow-guest, Mr. Stranger, I could only give him the answer he wanted.

"Word of honour?" he repeated.

"On my word of honour," I said.

He thanked me with such relief that I immediately doubted whether I had answered him truthfully. He was not, I had committed myself to saying, that which I insisted to my wife, to the professor and to Mrs. Reid that he was. However I might reassure him, I could not deny that the madness which had overtaken the party synchronized with his coming: was this a coincidence? If he was like the rest of us, I should have been able to make a frame for him; but his oracular answers told me nothing. From time to time my wife or the professor had hinted that I must "find out all about him"; and, as we walked back, I pressed my questions to the limit of decency and beyond. I could not ask him whether his name was

really "Stranger": he had played on the word that first night, when he called himself "a stranger in fact as well as in name." I could not ask how he had been wounded or which was his regiment when he headed my question by saying "Like your friend Colyton, I never want to hear the war mentioned." When I enquired if he knew Punch well, he replied smilingly that he might be called Punch's familiar spirit. When I talked of my boyhood at Nateby, he revealed a knowledge of the Wall that put mine to shame, but he would not tell me where he had lived. "Here, there, everywhere" was all he would say. "*Semper, omnibus, ubique*, like the Catholic church," he laughed.

Or like an embodied nature-spirit, I thought; or the undying incarnation of evil.

Now that he had wrung a denial from me, he seemed to be playing with me. My questions were made to seem ridiculous. I turned on him to see if he was mocking me and at once found myself face to face with Mr. Stranger, my fellow-guest.

5

ON reaching the castle, I went to Punch's room, which I found wrapped in darkness and silence. I was turning to leave when my name was called; and I found Punch still in bed, awake and even more tremulous than when I left him.

"It's true, old boy, it's true!", he whispered.

"What I told you?"

"Yes. She admits it, . . . she gloried in it. I've never met any one like her. If she'd been ten or twelve years older, one could understand, but she's not old

enough to know what she's talking about. And *I* ought to have protected her, may the Lord have mercy on me, a sinner! How did it begin, old boy, how did it begin?"

"I knew nothing for certain until she proclaimed the fact yesterday."

"Well, there's only one thing for me to do," said Punch with sudden resolution. "You'll soon have cause to thank God you're rid of a knave . . ."

I do not know whether he intended the threat to impress me, but I remember feeling that the suicide of one man could add little to our troubles. We were playing for bigger stakes; and I was annoyed that Punch should be reviewing means of deserting when even the halt and the blind were needed.

"I can't feel it will do much good to any one, if you cut your throat," I said. "It's your business to remain on this planet till you've seen whether this girl wants any help from you . . ."

"She wouldn't take it!" said Punch brokenly. "She sees what she's done, poor girl. I *made* her see. God, it was awful! She was like some one coming out of a trance, old boy. One moment talking this nature-gibberish; and then, when I hammered away . . . Her eyes changed . . . If you'd told her she'd committed murder in her sleep . . . She began to see. I found her looking at me. I'm no beauty, old boy, God knows, but I might have been a gorilla. She put up her hands to keep me away. If I'd been a leper . . . *Nature!* She didn't talk about nature any more. No glorying now . . . Please God she doesn't try anything desperate: I've her soul on my conscience and I don't want her life as well."

"What's happened to her?," I asked.

"They're looking after her, your wife and Mrs. Reid, by turns. She mustn't be left to herself whatever happens. It was terrible, terrible! *He* mustn't get hold of her . . ."

"He?"

Punch laid a trembling finger on his lips and looked about him in an agony of fear.

"No names, old boy, no names!" he whispered. "He . . . *You* know! I didn't think it was possible. When people talked about selling your soul. He'd come to me in some way I can't remember. He went about with me everywhere. When I started out for this place, I said he mustn't leave me; and he said he wouldn't. He *wouldn't*! He'd never leave me! I didn't think about him till this girl told me about the marks. Then I saw. . . . And she saw too. Damned souls! I tried . . ." His fingers, groping under the pillow, brought forth a razor, which he threw on to the floor. "*That's* no good. It's not my carcass he wants. The longer I can hold on the better. Once the worms get at me . . . We may diddle him yet. There must be places where he *can't* follow, old boy? If I went into a church . . .? I've been trying to pray, but I can't. He gets in the way. He'd get in the way if he saw me making for a church. You can't do anything against him. But that girl! It's not her fault. It's not the fault of the others. Damned souls . . . !"

He was beginning to wander, repeating himself and breaking down from time to time in a miserable whimper. To reason with him in his present state would be wasted labour; but, before anything could be done with the others, I had to know how far this new delusion had spread.

"What have you been telling this girl?," I asked.

"I've not told her anything, old boy. She told me. She was talking about you . . ." He looked round the room again with the same expression of terror and moistened his lips. "You and . . . Stranger. Some story you'd made up . . . I got confused, because she kept dragging in a cloven hoof. She said she'd seen the marks of it. I thought I was going off my head, old boy. Cloven hoof? It was like the woman who was following me about all yesterday . . . Where was I? Oh, then she told me your story; and I said she'd missed the point of it. The cloven hoof wasn't Pan's . . ."

"She didn't believe that story; and no more do you," I interrupted him sharply.

"She sees now, old boy," he continued without heeding me. "What she did; *and why she did it.*" . . .

"What are you hinting at, Punch?," I cried.

He blinked in foolish surprise at me; and his voice dropped into the sing-song of an imbecile:

"*She* knows. And *I* know. And *you* know. We name no names, but all the same we *know*. Now, what we *don't* know is what to do about it. How to get rid of him? I told you I believed in sin, but I didn't believe in *him*. And I don't know that I believed in hell, but I do now. Oh, God! Keep him away! Keep him away!"

I have seen faces distorted with fear, but I have never, before or since, seen one that lost in a moment all sign of humanity. Punch Escott clawed at me with one hand, while the other dragged the bed-clothes over half his face. The other half—matted hair, a streaming forehead and protuberant eyes—belonged to a tormentor's nightmare. I had heard no sound to occasion such alarm,

but, as this travesty of a man gobbled and trembled, a knock fell upon the door. After a moment's silence which neither of us could break, the door was thrown open. One of the footmen came in with a tray.

I am not sure that Punch's quivering sigh of relief was not more ignoble than his earlier panic. I contrived to screen him by taking the tray. When we were alone I first turned on the lights and then pulled the curtains apart.

"A little day-light may bring you to your senses," I said. "I'm going to see Mrs. Reid . . ."

"You can't leave me!," he whispered.

"I want some more bromide for you."

"I shan't take it. Good God, man, d'you think I can afford to sleep? That's what he's waiting for. If he can catch me off my guard . . ."

"If you don't take it from me, I shall send for a doctor. And then you won't know what he's putting inside you."

"I shall never sleep again! Nor will she. . ."

"I'm going to leave you now," I said. "You must pull yourself together, Punch. No one's 'waiting for' you. No one's trying to 'catch' you off your guard . . ."

"You don't know," he moaned. "But *I* know. And *she* knows. *She* knows. And *I* know." . . .

On my way downstairs I tapped at Mrs. Reid's door and suggested that a doctor should be summoned without delay. I found her eating a hurried meal from a tray on her writing-table, while Enid made vain offers of food to a crumpled little figure in an arm-chair. I addressed myself only to Mrs. Reid, pretending not to notice the figures in the window. I even pretended that

I had not seen one of them crossing herself as I entered the room.

"The doctor should be a man of discretion," I added. "He's likely to hear some strange things. And he should be told to bring some strong opiates. Speaking as a layman, I should say that a long sleep is about the one thing to save my patient. Yours too, in all probability."

Mrs. Reid looked across the room with a light of spiritual exaltation in her eyes.

"My . . . *patient?*," she repeated. "I have no patient. The body may suffer, but the soul is safe. At the eleventh-hour. A brand plucked from the burning," she pronounced, with a throw-back to atavistic Calvinism.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE EVENING OF THE FOURTH DAY

I

WHILE we awaited the arrival of the doctor, I sought out the Shaplands and asked the professor if he would help me in keeping Punch Escott under observation.

"I really believe these people are coming back," I said, "but it's like wrenching their souls from their bodies. We're winning, but there's a big fight ahead of us still. Has Stranger returned?"

"I've not been out of this room since yesterday," answered the professor.

"I went for a walk with him this morning," I said. "He asked me whether it would make things easier if he left. An opportunity wasted, you may think! I couldn't say it, any more than I could say it to you. I was talking to a man of flesh and blood like myself. Escott and Miss Arley think they've surrendered to the devil. The others, if they think at all . . ."

I paused to wonder what Adela and the rest made of the Stranger and whether they ever associated him with their startling change of outlook. The Helmsleys, I learned, were yielding through boredom where they had been immovable by coercion. Deprived of suitable partners and tiring of a house in which every one now

had his meals served in his own room, they were leaving in the car that took the doctor back to Newcastle.

We went down into the hall, where we found Adela seated barefoot by the fire; she was dressing a blistered heel and talking to Stranger, who was feeding her with sandwiches. She explained that she had been tramping all day on the moors in the hope of getting rid of the "stench from the ball", as she expressed it elegantly.

"It's no use looking shocked," she continued aggressively to Mrs. Shapland. "People that night *reeked*. And you know it. The house isn't clean yet. The women reeked of powder, the men reeked of tobacco. And they both reeked from eating too much and being out of condition. Pariah dogs. . . . It's true, so why shouldn't I say it?"

"It's quite . . . natural that you should say it," I answered mildly, "if you feel like that about it."

Adela crammed the last of the sandwiches into her mouth and lay back with her hands clasped under her head, munching reflectively.

"Your usual sneer nowadays!" she murmured. "I suppose you don't *want* to be free?"

"I should like to be, if I could find suitable surroundings," I answered; "but to turn out 'free' men and women in civilized—or servile—or sophisticated—society is like turning out a rogue elephant in the middle of Bond Street. It's not real freedom even for the short time that it lasts; and its path is marked by wholesale wreckage from beginning to end."

Adela opened her eyes at me and sighed in utter bewilderment:

"I simply don't know what you mean. A few of us *have* had the intelligence to see the futility of the life

most people lead. You may approve or you may not; but to talk of *wreckage* . . ."

"You have not seen Punch and Miss Arley," I said.

"Those two! *He* was drinking himself into his grave, which I can assure you is not my idea of living naturally, and *she* probably picked up the habit from him. You can't detect any difference . . . ? Oh, Mr. Stranger, do make him see reason!"

We all turned, at the challenge, to the alcove beside the fire-place where Stranger was sitting. As usual, whenever some one else could be found to talk, he was listening in silence; he was also watching us steadily. I had not observed whether he exchanged any greetings with the Shaplands, but I noticed that by accident or design they were standing rigidly on guard with a sofa and two chairs covering them. Since my walk that morning, still more since I had heard him recommending Adela some old-fashioned remedy for her blistered foot, I could only look upon Stranger, in a phrase that I have already used, as my fellow-guest. How Mrs. Shapland regarded him I had no idea, but I thought the professor looked excited, as though Baal were being invoked to demolish his mockers. Stranger flushed and smiled awkwardly, as always when the attention of the company was concentrated on him. I, remembering our passage of the day before and of that morning, found my heart beating more quickly.

"I'm . . . I'm afraid," he stammered. "You've come to the wrong person, Miss Glynde. That is to say . . . Well, you see, I agree with Mr. Kingsbury."

"You agree?," Adela cried in amazement.

Stranger laughed appeasingly:

"I am no lover of convention, but we live in a conventional world. You must adapt yourself to your surroundings or your surroundings to yourself. And the second is a laborious and lengthy process!"

"I don't see *why* . . .," Adela began.

"Because society cannot allow exceptions in its fundamentals. During the late war, certain people said that they would take no part because war was unchristian. Some of them were martyred for their convictions; and them I honour most highly. Society, however, felt that it was impossible for one country to follow the Christian ideal unless all followed it. Who turned first the one cheek and then the other, in the name of Christ, would incontinently reduce by one the number of those who worshipped the name of Christ. Society would be committing suicide. It must be all or none. Society keeps men and women tethered in mutual loathing, because natural selection strikes at the foundations of society. It makes us wear clothes. It compels us to keep alive our cripples and imbeciles. It proscribes nature. And we must submit or go into exile."

He paused as one of the footmen came to tell Adela that Mrs. Reid wished to see her.

"Bother the woman!," Adela exclaimed without getting up. Then she turned on Stranger in disappointment which she did not try to conceal:

"I never expected to hear *you* . . ."

Stranger smiled again, this time less awkwardly:

"You must not think me an apostate from natural living if I point out a few of its difficulties. I believe . . . I believe," he repeated solemnly, as though he were reciting a creed, "that nature is our father and our law-giver and our judge. All the ills from which the world is

suffering are the punishment for transgressions of nature's laws. I believe," he continued, letting his brown eyes flicker across my face, as though he took me as his sounding-board, "that nature is a jealous god, rewarding the obedient, but visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children even unto the third and fourth generation. I am the last to decry the worship of nature; I believe that the world will some day live according to nature . . . Should I say, 'live *again* according to nature'? Any one who shares that view, however, is a pioneer; and the way of the pioneer is hard."

"But it's worth it!" Adela cried. "If it's a question of submitting or cutting oneself off from society . . . It's no one else's business how one chooses to live."

Before any of us could answer her, the footman returned with a pile of letters and a pencilled note from Mrs. Reid: "*Please do whatever you think best.*" I opened the first and discovered that some one whose name I have forgotten was regretting her inability to attend the party on Christmas Eve. The second letter was like the first; the third like the second. Without troubling to look at the rest, I realized that Nateby Castle was being boycotted.

"You say that society proscribes nature," Adela was protesting, "and then you want me to submit. I won't! If I have to fight society single-handed . . ."

Among the last of the letters I found a second pencilled note:

"*My housekeeper has given notice. The maids are quitting in a body. They say they don't feel safe. You must tell me what I'm to do.*"

I looked up to find Stranger still gently reasoning with the sprawling figure at his feet:

"Your pioneers in physical science were tortured and killed as blasphemers; your pioneers in practical medicine were burned as witches and sorcerers; your pioneer in gentleness and purity, in mercy and compassion, in unselfishness and generosity, in everything that lifts Christianity to a mountain-peak above my grovelling nature-worship, was betrayed by those he had saved and crucified by those he tried to save. You may feel that frank paganism is better than hypocritical Christianity . . ."

"I do! I've tried both. I don't say things are perfect yet." Adela flung an irate glance at the Shaplands. "There are too many fools in the world. I can tell you, though, that I never knew the meaning of peace or happiness till this week."

Stranger shook his head mournfully:

"You run a grave risk in saying so. You become a pioneer. In this room, no! But when you go abroad . . . The most charitable will think you mad; the next . . ." He hesitated as though he was seeking the apposite phrase, but I noticed that his eyes flickered once more across my face. ". . . the next will think that a sinister spirit has possessed you. Men of evil mind will say, as they have said of every pioneer, that you are in league with the devil. . . . It sounds absurd, does it not, in these latter days? How many believe in a devil at all? How few, of those few, would dare to hint that any man could barter him his soul! And yet . . . And yet . . ."

"And yet what?," asked Mrs. Shapland, breaking silence for the first time.

"And yet which of you has the courage of his scepticism?," Stranger taunted. "You do not believe in ghosts, but you would surrender your 'haunted' room, for

choice, to one who believed in them even less. You do not believe in bizarre, out-moded gods," he continued with a glance of frank and smiling challenge at me, "or the devil of the middle ages. And yet . . . And yet . . . If any of you chanced to meet me yonder in the park, if we walked together and if you found afterwards that the . . . *creature* by your side had printed a cloven hoof in the ground he trod, what would your scepticism avail you then? But I am becoming disputatious! I came here for news of Lord Escott and Miss Arley. I was told they were indisposed. Is there anything, do you think, that I can do? If not, I shall try to get a breath of fresh air before the light fails. Is any one feeling energetic? You are in no danger of finding hoof-marks beside your own," he laughed, glancing down at his shoes. "No one's tempted? Well, we shall meet at dinner, perhaps, if not before."

2

As the door closed behind him, Adela jumped up impatiently and shook herself like a dog.

"I simply don't understand what he was talking about," she muttered. "Every one here seems to have gone suddenly mad. Hoof-marks? Who said anything about hoof-marks? I didn't. You seem to have an obsession about hoof-marks . . ."

"It's rather a surprise," I said, "when you find a man with a hoof instead of a foot."

"But you don't, unless you're drunk," she snapped.

"The man who has just gone out . . .," I began.

"At least, when I call him a man . . ."

"What else should he be called?"

I could not answer. I did not know. Stranger's eyes had been fixed on mine as he talked of "bizarre, out-moded gods"; he was taunting me when he spoke of the rationalists who feared the ghosts in which they did not believe. And his reference to a cloven hoof was made defiantly, as though he knew why Enid had fainted, as though he had seen the professor poring over the prints in the trampled ground by the Wall. "*Be honest!*," he seemed to be saying. "*Admit that you were lying to-day when you gave me your word of honour that you found nothing amiss with me.*" And then he had invited us to walk with him, as though he knew we should be afraid to accept his challenge, and had gone off alone, as though he wished us to talk our fill about him before he came back.

I supposed that he meant to come back. That morning he had declared that he would pack his bag and disappear before any one had time to miss him unless he felt sure he was welcome. Should we interpret his outburst as a valediction? We were to meet "perhaps" at dinner, if not before. I wondered why he put in that "perhaps". We should certainly meet unless he defaulted.

"What else should he be called?," Adela demanded again.

"There have been times," I answered, "when I thought that Pan was come again. You invoked him. You opened your hearts to him, you surrendered to his spell . . ."

"If you like to put it that way. I should have thought it was easier to say that a few of us had shewn the good sense to live a natural life . . ."

"There have been times when I wondered if the devil had taken possession of you all. I find that easier to

believe than that half-a-dozen of you are right and every one else is wrong. The world is against you, Adela. If you read these letters, you'll see that this house is being put in quarantine. The servants are leaving. You may say that doesn't prove anything, but your half-a-dozen against the world is no longer even half-a-dozen. Punch and Miss Arley . . . Soon you'll be left alone. Right or wrong, the world will say you're mad, vicious, abandoned. A week ago you'd have said it yourself. Come away before things get worse! Your present mood won't last, I can assure you . . ."

"I'm going to sleep," Adela interrupted. "I'm tired. I suppose I must see what that stupid woman wants first . . ."

I dropped into a chair and mopped my face. For any mark that my pleading had left on Adela's mind, I might have been arguing with a stone. Her calm incredulity was reacting on me till I began to doubt my own senses. For the hundredth time in this unending nightmare, I could not be sure what I myself believed.

"What now, professor?," I asked. "You've seen this creature. You've seen his victims, if they *are* his victims. You've heard him demolishing himself. What do you believe? Is he . . .?"

The professor cut short my question as though he was afraid to hear the end of it.

"I do *not* believe he's a normal man like you and me," he answered guardedly. "My wife agrees. I trust her judgement highly and her instinct more highly . . ."

Mrs. Shapland nodded gravely and looked away:

"I have no eyes for other men and I am too old for other men to have eyes for me. I should not be a truthful woman, however, if I pretended that I did not

know when I was talking to an attractive man. Mr. Stranger's not attractive, he is not repellent. In talking to him, I am not conscious that I am talking to a man at all. This is not to say that I believe him to be more or less than a human being," she added with Scottish caution.

I turned to the professor:

"You believe . . .?"

"I do not believe that he lost his foot in the war."

"We have no evidence one way or the other," Mrs. Shapland added. "I agree with my husband, though."

"You believe, with Punch Escott . . .?," I persisted.

"I do not believe that he's the devil, if that's what you mean," said the professor in a single, rapid breath.

"Absurd! . . . And yet it's not more absurd . . . Should we not be seeing how Lord Escott is?"

As we went upstairs, I had to warn the professor to be prepared for a ghastly change. So far as I understood the symptoms, Punch had hovered the night before on the verge of *delirium tremens*; the control of brain and will was slipping from him; and he had not recovered it when I talked to him in the morning. This by itself would have been enough to unsettle most men; but, before his nerves were steady, I had told him with a candour that was perhaps premature and certainly brutal how he had employed his interval of insensibility. Now he had exchanged one delusion for another, which he had handed on to Jocelyn. For all I knew, she was handing it on to Adela, who might hand it on to Peter. I was not sure that their last state might not be worse than their first. Was I to blame? Could I say that, while Punch lay robbed of resistance, I had possessed his imagination and compelled him to think as I thought?

Then, had I thought what I had made him think? Did I think it now?

We were half-way up the stairs when I heard a car driving into the courtyard; and in Mrs. Reid's absence I interviewed the doctor and hinted that he had been summoned to prescribe for something more than a temporary nervous breakdown.

"If mental pathology admits of a dual personality," I said, "I believe that the Jekyll-and-Hyde experience has been repeated in this house. Some of the people here are in the Hyde phase, some have reverted to the Jekyll."

Dr. Overland looked at me suspiciously.

"Jekyll-and-Hyde?," he echoed.

"You're likely to hear some strange confessions. If I may, without impertinence, advise you, don't disbelieve anything unless you feel you must. Your first patient has been drinking pretty freely, but it would be a mistake for you to put everything down to drink."

With that I took him into Punch's room and left him to make his own diagnosis. Under the grave, professional mask I thought that the doctor looked startled; and I imagine that a provincial practitioner is not often obliged to meet such an expression as this demented wreck was wearing. I have on two occasions lived through an earthquake followed by a fire; I have seen the men with whom I had been talking a moment before, crushed like empty egg-shells or pinned and burning. I have looked on helplessly while houses were looted and rings were hacked off the fingers of the dying. Later, when the earth was once more steady and sanity returned, I have observed the haunted faces of men who for an hour had been turned loose in hell. For Punch Escott the mouth of the Pit was still yawning. His red-rimmed eyes held the

expression of one who has compassed experiences beyond the range of normal man; he was still sick and giddy at the recollection.

"Doctors?" he mumbled. "Doctors no good to me, old boy. I don't want doctors."

I shut the door and went in search of Mrs. Reid. She was in her room, mounting guard over the sleeping form of Jocelyn Arley.

"What have you done with him?" she whispered.

There was no need for me to ask, in that stricken house, who "he" was. If it could be avoided, no one mentioned his name. We looked fearfully about us when we referred to him. And the sleeping girl whimpered and tossed as though she knew who was being discussed.

"He's gone out. The doctor's here. Tell him to keep this child asleep at all costs. It's our one hope of saving her reason. As soon as she's fit to move . . ."

"I don't see what good we shall do by moving her. If he follows . . ."

"He won't!," I exclaimed. "If we *want* to get rid of him . . ."

My glib assurance failed me as I recalled Stranger's ringing conviction that mankind would one day live according to nature. I felt his thrust as he asked whether perhaps he should not say "*live again*" by this rule. Nature, he had told us, was a jealous god; was he to be expelled as lightly as he had been admitted?

"If I could be sure of that . . ." sighed Mrs. Reid.

I looked out through the falling dusk on the rain-swept moorland. Somewhere, probably among the trees or beside one of the innumerable tarns, the Stranger was lurking. Perhaps he was standing undecided at a cross-roads, wondering whether to come back to a house of

madmen, perhaps he was limping triumphantly home with the knowledge that he had worsted us. He had not, assuredly, vanished. Were we not all to meet at dinner, if not before?

Perhaps he was running and leaping. Perhaps he had stripped and was plunging into one of the brown, heather-ringed bog-pools. . . .

"If I could be sure of anything . . .," I muttered.

We were interrupted by a peremptory knock; and Adela came in, demanding what Mrs. Reid wanted of her. I do not know whether she felt that the atmosphere of the room was inimical, but she advanced on us as though she meant to strike the first blow. I pointed a warning finger at the girl sleeping on the sofa, but Adela was too full of grievances to heed any one but their author. It was high time, she told Mrs. Reid, for them to have an understanding; she allowed no one to insult her with impunity; and she was in fact being insulted on all hands. There was a conspiracy against her; and Mrs. Reid was unquestionably at the head of it.

"My maid's just given me notice," she announced. "It's no good your saying you didn't put her up to it! I asked her what the matter was; and she told me she was a respectable girl. Respectable girl! I liked that! 'I don't interfere with you,' I said, 'and you'd better not interfere with me.' Respectable! A respectable slave! She told me that all the others were in the conspiracy. I didn't care! But I did care when she began to be impudent. I boxed her ears. It's not safe to be impudent unless you can protect yourself. And she couldn't. I held her two hands with one of mine and slapped her till she couldn't see. The more she screamed the harder I slapped. I never knew how strong I was. She won't

be impudent again. To be lectured by a pasty-faced slut that no man would look at . . . Where are you going to?"

The cool savagery of the recital had paralysed us, but Mrs. Reid was now hurrying to the door.

"Where . . . where is she now?" she gasped.

"Half-way to London, I should think!" Adela laughed exultantly. "I've never seen anybody run faster! Well, I hope it will be a lesson to the others. And to *you*, Henrietta! You've driven the Helmsleys away. You're driving Mr. Stranger away. You're setting every one against me. I'm absolutely alone." . . . Her voice became suddenly plaintive. "I was so happy before you set every one against me, but now you make me feel I'm unclean. If you go on pretending I'm mad, you'll make me believe it," she continued to me. "Why can't you *understand*? Mr. Stranger did, but you've driven him away. I feel so lost without him."

She walked to the window and stared disconsolately into the gathering darkness. I exchanged glances with Mrs. Reid and then tiptoed out of the room. Whether or no the Stranger came back to us, I felt that the magnetism of his presence was weakening. As I went away, Adela was speaking tonelessly, as though she was slowly waking from a trance. "Alone . . . Absolutely alone . . . No one backs me up . . . I'm beginning to doubt myself . . ." She must be fully awake, I resolved, before the Stranger came back.

3

FOR two days I had acted as seneschal for Mrs. Reid; and I could, on my own responsibility, order that the

doors should be closed. I was hurrying into the hall when the doctor came into the gallery and asked if I could spare him ten minutes. The ten lengthened to twenty, the twenty to thirty, fifty, an hour. At the outset I had insisted that the professor and his prosaic, level-headed wife should be present; I am not sure that their testimony did not make the doctor fancy that he was confronted with three lunatics instead of one, but at least we were consistent in our madness. The same questions were put to all three of us in turn; they were dressed in a dozen different guises. We never hesitated, we never contradicted ourselves. At the end I asked what explanation would fit the facts which we had presented; and I was forced to admire the doctor's diplomacy when he answered that he was concerned to prescribe for a given mental condition, not to pass judgement on the events by which that condition had been brought about.

"At the same time," I persisted, "you must have a theory of your own. These people are mad."

"I prefer to say 'abnormal'. The world is what each man believes it to be," answered the doctor. "According to your state of health or stage of education, the world becomes more or less fantastic. Humiliating as it may seem, your alienist knows only one test of sanity: the opinion of the majority. When the majority believed that the sun revolved round the earth, any one who thought differently was regarded as a madman. We now regard as mad the people who try to prove that the earth is flat. Lord Escott is at present suffering from a delusion. There was a time when we should have been condemned as suffering from a delusion if we had not shared his belief."

More than this the cautious and perplexed doctor would not say. When I questioned him about epidemic hysteria, he replied prudently that he was only at the beginning of his investigations. I took him to Mrs. Reid and came back to the gallery. For the next hour I can only say that we sat waiting: what we were waiting to see happen I doubt if any of us could say. The party varied from moment to moment. At its biggest we had the professor and Mrs. Shapland, Enid and Peter. Then, at a sound from Punch Escott's room, Peter drifted away to see what was amiss. A car drove into the courtyard; and, some ten minutes later, the Helmsleys came down dressed for travelling. Nora informed us that this place was getting on her nerves: "the excitement, the mad gaiety are too much for a little town-mouse like me," she explained ironically. Keith stalked sullenly through the midst of us without troubling to say good-bye: his single comment on his wife's thin pleasantry was "Bloody fool!"

Tea was being brought in when the doctor appeared. Refusing anything to eat or drink, he led me out of earshot and invited me to discuss Miss Arley as frankly as I had already discussed Punch Escott.

"I want the whole truth," he added in a tone that I thought almost truculent. "I have good reason to believe that girl has been the victim of a criminal assault. It's no good trying to shelter any one."

"I can assure you she has not been assaulted," I answered. "And I shan't waste your time or mine by trying to shelter people who won't shelter themselves. Did she tell you anything . . .?"

"She was like an oyster, . . . though I don't think she was trying to hide anything. It was just that she

was too much stunned. She's an American, isn't she? Do you know anything of her people? They ought to be warned. This is going to be a very long business with her. Her mind must be taken off this idea . . ."

"What does she think has happened?," I asked.

"Hadn't you better tell me first what in fact happened?"

"I can only tell you what she proclaimed publicly to the entire house-party the other morning. She announced as though it were the most natural thing in the world, that she and your rather unprepossessing other patient were lovers."

The doctor gave me another glance of suspicion and muttered that he must not lose his train.

"The professor can bear out all I've said," I told him, as we went downstairs.

When the car had driven away, I gave orders for the doors to be shut and locked. I was told that Mr. Stranger had not returned, but I invented a story of daylight robberies and hinted that Mrs. Reid was nervous. Then I came back to the gallery.

We had passed the stage at which any one tried to control events: if anything were required of me, I would try to be helpful, but I could not undertake to reason with Punch or to restrain Adela or to soothe Miss Arley. I personally had passed the stage at which I could speculate or argue. Man has only a limited capacity for surprise; and mine was exhausted. We sat—the professor and his wife, Enid and I—avoiding one another's eyes and waiting.

Were we waiting for Stranger's return? Were we waiting to hear that he had not returned?

"The Helmsleys have given us a lead," I told Enid at last. "I've said it before, but this time I shall allow nothing to stand in the way: I leave this house to-morrow . . ."

I stopped at the sound of hurrying feet and instinctively put myself in a posture of defence as Mrs. Reid hurried into the gallery, white-faced and panting.

"Come at once!" she gasped. "Some one must hold her down, or she'll try again. By the mercy of providence she caught her skirt on a nail. Otherwise she'd have been dashed to pieces!" Covering her eyes to shut out the imagined horror, she tugged at my sleeve. "Of course, it was an accident," she went on. "That's the story we must tell if any one saw her before I dragged her back. An accident . . . We'll say she overbalanced while she was trying to open the window. But for the nail . . . And God in his everlasting mercy put it there! . . ."

"Tell me what happened," I begged. "Miss Arley tried to throw herself out of window?"

Mrs. Reid looked at me in astonishment:

"What are you talking about? Miss Arley? It was *Adela*! As soon as she *realized* . . . As soon as Jocelyn and I *shewed* her . . ."

The doors of Nateby Castle were not to remain barred that night. When I came down, convinced at last that Adela was too much broken in spirit to make another attempt on her own life, I found them standing open to all the rain and wind of that tempestuous Christmas Eve. I begged one of the footmen to shut them and was told that my own wife had asked to have them left open till the hall had been ventilated. At the moment the queer animal-scent that had troubled us for three days seemed

to have disappeared; and I repeated my request. On this I was respectfully but firmly taken to task: if the doors were locked on this Christmas Eve, it would be for the first time in history. Had I not heard of the bread and meat and ale that awaited any one who asked for them? The tradition included a place by the fire for every Christian that knocked, a room to lie till he was rested and money to speed him on his way.

"It wouldn't do to bring bad luck on the house," the man concluded.

His tone was innocent of irony; but, though he smiled in apology for his superstition, I could see that he would not be shaken easily. Bad luck on the house? Mentally, I cursed his ignorant gullibility; then I cursed my own cowardice. If I had not feared his ridicule, I should have said, tradition or no tradition, the doors were to be closed this night against some one who had brought pandemonium on the house. Then I pictured myself explaining that Mr. Stranger, whose name was not really Stranger, that my lame fellow-guest who was not really lame and assuredly was not my fellow-guest, that this person for whom the young footman had no doubt unpacked and laid out clothes . . . I could not go on. More disabling even than the fear of ridicule was my incurable uncertainty. Who or what was the man we called Stranger? Who or what did I believe he was?

"You don't seriously believe it would bring bad luck . . .?," I began, in tentative raillery.

Instead of a direct answer the man pointed to a loaded table by the door. From the courtyard I heard the sound of voices and observed a circle of unfamiliar, grave faces. As though I had not been brought up on the story, I was told by the leader of the group that Sir Hugh

de Nysson, who lay buried in the crypt, had taken an oath that, if he returned in safety from his crusade, no Christian should ask of him in vain on this night of the year. The custom was more enduring than the family which had instituted it. The last of the male Dennisons had fallen without leaving an heir, but Mrs. Reid had given instructions a year before that the dole was to be maintained scrupulously; and the deputation of elders had called to tender the thanks of the village.

Belatedly mindful of the story which I had made up about daylight robberies, I ordained that, if the doors remained unlocked, the night-watchman must be in attendance. With a view to seeing whether my excuse had been accepted, I added that this precaution might well be made known. The maids, I had been given to understand, were nervous; some of them even talked of leaving. I hoped they would not hold to their threats at a time when several people in the house were ill. Could any one tell me what had occasioned this nervousness?

The footman hinted that the house was believed to be haunted. Hurrying feet and banging doors had been heard night after night in various parts of the castle; and now, on the sworn testimony of a dozen agitated witnesses, a figure had been seen passing through the maids' wing and trying the handles of the doors. An alarm had been raised; and the figure had disappeared.

"I've stayed in this house since I was a boy," I said, "and this is the first time I've been told it was haunted. If you'd said some young ass was trying to play a silly practical joke . . ."

"I don't think it was that, sir. The men sleep in a different part of the house; and they couldn't get through

to the maids' wing if they tried. This thing, whatever it may be, sir, was dressed like a man. Or so they say, but you know what a pack of silly girls are like when they're scared, sir."

"Tell them to lock their doors and leave the lights on in the passages," I recommended. "I understand ghosts and practical jokers are alike in avoiding strong lights. As for noises! In a house of this age . . ."

I shrugged my shoulders and brought the interview to an end. If I made too light of this story, I might find substituted for it a statement that the nocturnal visitor to the maids' wing had been Keith or Peter. Whatever had been observed or suspected in the last four days, I felt that the men-servants were too well-trained and too well-placed to let their tongues wag; I could not be so certain of young girls who might with good reason be shocked or frightened at finding themselves waiting on a licensed debauch. If Adela's maid was by now recovered from her scare, she must be spreading a strange story.

Loitering aimlessly in the hall after the deputation had departed with its bread and ale, I tried to imagine the conversation between the Helmsleys and Doctor Overland on their way to Newcastle. From what I had seen of the doctor, I did not expect him to say much, but I judged that the notes in his case-book would make queer reading. He was not unnaturally sceptical when I talked of a Jekyll-and-Hyde transformation; but, before he left the house, he had examined and interrogated two people who could only explain their late actions and present reactions on the supposition that they had been possessed by a spirit. Had he waited another ten minutes, he might have watched a third as the spirit departed. For all I knew he was watching such another change at this

moment. If, as I believed, the spell was growing momentarily weaker, Keith and Nora would pass through a period of uncertainty and bewilderment, followed by realization. They would, no doubt, begin by explaining why they had left the castle in the middle of the party: with effortless candour and thinly marked impatience, Nora would make known that she and her husband were tired of each other and only lived together for the sake of appearances; he had for years followed any woman who took his fancy and now, when she found a man who attracted her, there was such a to-do from Mrs. Reid and the others that life at Nateby was become insupportable. With candour of a different kind, I could imagine Keith's amplifying the explanation: he continued to live with his wife, as he had married her in the first place, because he needed money and she had it; he would never have come to Nateby if it had not been a convenient house-of-call on his way to Scotland; now there was no niche for him to occupy.

And then, I supposed, something would set them wondering at their own words. They would falter and repeat themselves, as though they had been talking in their sleep and were trying to recapture the fading mist of a dream. In imagination I saw Keith's urbanity returning to him; the practised, unfailing smile would light up his face as he set himself to lay the doctor under his spell. In the darkness of the car, silent and shrinking, Nora would realize that she had done what she had so often threatened to do, that she had taken a lover and was now boasting about it. As though I were present, I could hear their speech slowly freezing on their lips.

"And *then* what?" I asked myself. "We've none of us had time to look ahead."

I was recalled to the present by the butler, who informed me that the ballet would be ready to begin in half-an-hour's time. I must have echoed the word, for he reminded me that Mrs. Reid had engaged a company from London and that every one within motoring-distance of Nateby had been invited to attend. After the ballet, the christmas-tree was to be illuminated and despoiled. There would then be a supper and dancing for any one that cared to stay.

"There's seats for two hundred," he concluded. "Mrs. Reid did not tell me how many to provide for."

I took it upon myself to say that far fewer than two hundred were likely to come. Growing fertile in imagination, I added that, after Mrs. Reid's indisposition, I had put off all of the guests that I could reach. As I had omitted to put off the company, I promised to muster as many spectators as possible and suggested that some of the vacant seats should be filled by the disaffected maids. Any distraction was welcome at this time; and I sent my wife to see whether Adela and Jocelyn were fit to appear in public. Of Punch I felt more doubtful; but, the sooner we could bring him to take part in the normal life of the house, the sooner he would begin to think as a normal man. I found him fully dressed in his room, walking unsteadily from door to window and back again, while Peter refreshed him with coffee which his own hands were too tremulous to lift.

"Did the doctor say you might get up?" I enquired.

"I feel better now, old boy," Punch answered evasively.

"And I couldn't stay in bed any more. I should have fallen asleep." I now understood the purpose of the black coffee and of this restless patrol. By similar means I had seen a woman being kept awake after an overdose

of laudanum. I made a gesture of impatience; and Punch turned on me hysterically: "All very well for you! I know you think it's all imagination . . ."

"Not at all," I corrected him. "Certain facts speak for themselves. I say, though, that you've been seriously ill, you're still badly shaken; but, when you're all right again, you'll find that these same facts, however distressing, hardly require the dreadful explanation you give them."

My language, guarded to the point of obscurity till I should find out how much he had told his companion, seemed to bewilder him.

"Not sure I follow," he mumbled. "Mustn't go to sleep, though. Peter sees that, too."

So far I had kept all my attention for Punch. I now looked at Peter, who had set down the coffee-cup and flung himself into a chair. He was sitting huddled, shading his face from the light and staring into the fire with the terrible unwinking fixity of a corpse. Between his knees he was gripping an empty tumbler; and I noticed an open brandy-bottle beside the coffee-pot.

"What has Punch been telling you?," I asked him.

There was no answer in words, but, almost as though my voice had reminded him that he was alive, Peter pulled the tumbler from between his knees and waved it vaguely. I put out my hand to receive it; but, through clumsiness or miscalculation, the glass fell to the ground and was shattered. The noise was inconsiderable; but the screams of the two men chilled my blood. I use the word deliberately: they did not "cry out", they screamed like creatures in torment, such a sound as I have only heard from the witless. And they were frightened by the sound of their own voices. Each scream urged the

next one a semitone higher; and, with utter loss of control, they continued their shocking rivalry until I caught their wrists and made them look up at me. Then they shivered and fell silent again.

"D'you want a drink, Peter?," I asked.

"Please!," he whispered. "Sorry to make such a racket! My nerves are a bit on edge; and you startled me. . . . Well, Punch has been telling me all about it."

He looked away, muttering to himself: "All about it . . . All about it . . . All about it . . ."

"What's he been telling you?," I enquired.

"All we've been up to. I knew there was *something* wrong, but I couldn't tell what. Seems hard, doesn't it, Frank?"

4

HIS voice was trembling; and he took another gulp at the brandy. I do not know how much the bottle had contained nor what help Punch had given him in draining it, but I observed that it was now three-parts empty. The restless patrol between window and door had begun again; and I caught a sing-song mutter. "Musn't go to sleep, old lad! Mustn't go to sleep!" Peter plucked at my sleeve and drew me on to the arm of his chair. With thick solemnity he informed me that, if I was not myself too drunk to see, I should realize that Punch was drunk to the point of insensibility. The old man, Peter confided with another pull at his glass, ought to "cut it right out"; it was "getting in his way"; he was "seeing things, you know: things that aren't there. Picking up some pretty odd fancies, too." Lowering his voice,

he informed me with a tentative laugh that poor old Punch believed the devil was coming for him: in some way he had sold his soul; and it would be taken from him as soon as he allowed himself to sleep.

"He should cut it right out," Peter insisted again. "It's different for me . . ."

His hand wavered towards the bottle, but I put it out of his reach.

"You should cut it out too," I said. "You've got on without it for some days now, Peter. You only take it to buck yourself up when you're tired. Now, if you were to curl up and go to sleep . . ."

"I take it for a different reason," he interrupted. "I want to forget. . . . It seems hard, doesn't it?," he appealed to me again.

"What's hard?," I asked.

He wrinkled his forehead in a desperate effort to collect his straying wits.

"The whole business. It's like that play, where every one had a second chance. I've chucked mine away. You see, I was done for in the war. It was on my nerves. I couldn't forget. You all knew I was pretty bad, but you none of you knew how bad I was. If I'd had one single thing to hold on to . . . I don't blame Adela for turning me down: I must have seemed a pretty sodden sort of proposition; but she was the one person who might have pulled me out of hell. She turned me down, though, and I saw there was nothing left. Then . . . Then, by Jove! . . . I don't yet know how it came about, but I got my second chance! She suddenly changed! I changed! For a time—God alone knows how long it was!—I lived in Heaven! I was a *man*! And she was the one woman in all the world . . ."

I don't know whose fault it was. Between us, we managed to spoil things. I suppose we were both so happy that we went off our heads. We were lovers and we gloried in it. Punch . . . He ought to cut it right out! He's getting religious-mania. It's affecting his brain. Punch went for me like a parson and tried to make out that *we'd* sold our souls too. If I'd thought he knew what he was talking about, I'd have given him hell on my own account. But you can't argue with a man who thinks there's a devil waiting for him round the corner. He's fixed it all on that lame fellow, by the way. Swears he isn't lame at all. Swears he has a cloven hoof. If he doesn't cut it right out . . ."

As he began to repeat himself, I asked what Adela had said or done.

"Adela? Nothing, as yet. But you know her! When she comes to her senses and sees what we've done . . . So much for my second chance, I must forget I have had it. Forget I was ever anything but a sot and a brute-beast. Forget . . . We might have been happy, you know. It seems hard."

He stretched out his hand for the bottle; and this time I did not forbid him. We talk lightly of men with the eyes of lost souls, but I had never before seen an expression that fulfilled so accurately my conception of hopelessness and of eternal damnation.

"Mustn't go to sleep, old lad," Punch muttered drowsily, resting against a chair. "Mustn't go to sleep!"

What was to be done with them? I walked to the fire and stood over them in the hope of capturing their wills.

"Why shouldn't you be happy still?" I asked Peter.

"Because we've changed. I haven't seen Adela, but I *know*. I can't explain. If you'd ever been given morphia, you'd understand. All the pain and misery stopped by magic. We were free, open with each other. No fears, no pretences, no regrets . . . O God, we were one! We forgot we'd ever been parted, we forgot we'd ever been unhappy. *Now* . . . The morphia's lost its grip. The dream's over. We're slipping back, slipping back. The old pains, the old shams . . . And when she realizes . . ."

"She realizes now," I had to tell him. "It was naturally a shock . . ."

"But what made us behave like that? I don't believe Punch's nonsense about a devil finding work for idle hands . . ."

He stopped at a muffled scream. Punch had fallen asleep, but at the sound of his own name or with a guess at what we were discussing, he roused and, with a wild glance into the shadowy corners of the room, took up his patrol once more.

"Do you believe in spirits of any kind?," I asked Peter. "Do you believe a spirit has possessed you? And not you alone? A good many people have been behaving rather surprisingly. Do you remember it all?" I caught Punch by the shoulder and compelled him to stand still. "Do you remember," I asked Peter, "that you and Keith were fighting like hell-hounds the other night . . ."

"'Hell-hounds' is good," said Punch.

". . . and that I pulled you apart? Do you remember . . .?"

"We've not forgotten anything," said Peter quietly. "I thought it was a dream. I couldn't *believe* . . ."

Adela . . . *Adela!* I prayed it might be a dream, but I've Keith's marks on me yet. I don't understand. When you talk about spirits . . ."

Punch wriggled out of my grasp to resume his pacing and muttering:

"Mustn't go to sleep, old lad. . . . I didn't believe till I had to. . . . Mustn't go to sleep. . . . You all come to it. I did. Jocelyn did. No way out of it. You can't *escape* him. Moment you go to sleep . . . You've given yourself up. He's got you . . ."

"I don't understand!" Peter cried in mounting despair. "We were all right. It was *like* a dream. Everything seemed absolutely natural. *Now* . . . My God, *Adela* . . ."

Bowing his head, he rocked from side to side.

Should I make light of their remorse? I discovered that I could not if I would. They were not, I felt, so grievously troubled by anything they had done as by the knowledge that for a time at least their souls had been stolen from them. First Punch, now Peter were waiting for the moment when their wills would again be snatched away.

"You're losing all sense of reality," I said. "Come out of this room. When you mix with your fellow-creatures again . . ."

I caught Peter by the arm and pulled him to his feet. Rather to my surprise he did not resist; and Punch, wailing that we must not leave him alone, hurried after as I opened the door. We reached the miniature theatre in the ball-room, as the orchestra sidled into place; and I sank into a chair next my wife for the grimmest enjoyment of a ballet that any man is likely to experience.

I have no idea what was played. The performance, I am sure, was beyond criticism, or Mrs. Reid would have cleared the theatre with a whip and telegraphed to London for a new company to be despatched by aeroplane. At some point, unnoticed by me, since the time when she broke down with hysterics and left me to order the house and to disperse the house-party, our hostess had recovered her old morale. The mutiny among her maids had been suppressed; and, when I saw one pathetic and crumpled figure with swollen eyes and a scratched face, I judged that I was looking at the victim of Adela's fury and that, after crushing the mutiny Mrs Reid had been rounding up deserters. She was rounding up everybody. With tugs and pushes worthy of an exasperated school-teacher, she thrust her unresisting guests into chairs and set a guard over them. Darting to and fro like an angry dragon-fly, she lectured her friends and hectored her servants with the intolerance which I had so much disliked at our first meeting. The rebellious puritan had vanished in company with the bewildered provincial; the "life of nature" was forgotten; and we lay once more in the grip of naked purchasing-power. Mrs. Irwin T. Reid, I felt, had discovered that her party was getting out of hand; her reputation as a hostess was in jeopardy.

When the lights were lowered, I turned in my chair to observe the audience. By now, the Helmsleys were probably on their way to Scotland. I wondered what they made of these last four days. I wondered what any of us would make of them when we came to breathe the common air again. A conflict, in which we had wrestled for our sanity and struggled for the possession of our immortal souls, was ending at last. Four of our number

had returned to us. What were they thinking? What could they think? Their eyes were glazed; and their brains, I am very sure, were numbed. Weak and docile, they clapped when the rest of us clapped and went on clapping till Mrs. Reid, glaring and turning like an indignant governess, urged them to stop. Then they stopped and once more stared at the stage with uncomprehending eyes. What magic or wonder could a ballet hold for any one of their experience?

What would they think when their stupefaction passed?

At the end we took them by the arm and led them to the justice-room. They accepted our guidance without question and met one another without embarrassment. Their brains, when they could be stirred to use them, worked rationally enough; and, as we lighted the candles for the Christmas-tree and cut down the presents, every one played his part adequately, if with no pretence of interest. I asked myself what, indeed, would interest me if I awoke on earth to find that I had passed three days in heaven or fairyland or the pit from which some of them fancied they were emerging.

Adela, staring at a jade pendant, asked me what she should do with it.

"It's a present," I explained. "From Mrs. Reid. You must thank her for it. And then you must wear it. This seems to be the last of the Christmas-tree. Now we have the carol-singers. Then, I suppose, dinner. After that . . ."

"Do you think Enid would let me sleep in her room to-night?," she interrupted. "I daren't be alone."

"I'm sure she'd love it," I said. "What are you afraid of, Adela?"

She looked cautiously round the room; and her eyes, normally grey, were black with fear.

"Him," she whispered. "Where is he?"

"He's not come in yet. I don't suppose he's coming back. Anyway, he won't bother you if you shew you don't want him."

"Are you sure?"

"Certain," I replied, though I wished that I did not keep recalling Stranger's phrase that mankind would one day live again according to nature and that nature was a jealous god.

We moved into the hall and seated ourselves in a half-circle round the fire. From the gallery above our heads came the thin note of a tuning-fork; and an unseen choir burst into song. Carol succeeded carol: old English, German and Scandinavian. The programme was ambitious, almost too ambitious for the occasion; and I heard Mrs. Shapland whisper:

"Are we to have none of the old favourites?"

As though the whisper had been heard, the choir broke joyously into one that clashed and pealed like wedding-bells:

*"In excelsis gloria,
In excelsis gloria
In excelsis gloria
In excelsis gloria."*

The young voices poured out like liquid silver; and a ripple of satisfaction ran through the hall.

"I wonder when that song was written," murmured the professor, edging his chair nearer to mine. "Whenever I hear it, I am convinced anew that the world must once have been a happy place." A sigh escaped him as he looked round on the dull or troubled faces glowering

in the fire-light. "It's not my subject, but we most of us believe in a golden age. We talked the other night of those gaunt fanatics who made Christianity ascetic; but, before they burst in with their joyless negations, I like to think that the Christ of love got a hearing. Can you not fancy how the gospel—God's word—swept like fire through a parched and decaying world? That Epirot village we pictured that evening; and the stammering shepherd-boy who has heard the tale of wonder from a fellow-shepherd beyond the sundering hills. A new and marvellous way of life has been revealed. Lips are smiling, eyes are shining! Christianity has not yet learned to be gloomy. *In excelsis gloria*. He teaches the air and makes up the words. Imagine how that song was sung by men and women who were hearing for the first time of Christ's birth in Bethlehem! A cascade of laughter! '*When Chríst was born in Bethléhém . . .*' . You could get the same effect in Greek . . . and in Latin. Iambic dimeters. Or French. And you can imagine men and women joining hands and dancing to that tune. It reconciles the pagan and the Christian . . . If it is not very old, it ought to be."

"It is not old . . . as I reckon age," a voice interposed behind us.

I turned to find myself looking at an inverted triangle of white: a shirt-front surmounted by a black tie. Above the tie shone the flesh-lights of a lean, aquiline face. It was Stranger, returned from his walk. He had been drenched to the skin, he told me, and had dressed early.

5

WOULD that my memory could return me my impressions as quickly as they formed! I was startled; that

I remember. And then I was agreeably disappointed. Whenever, in the last two or three hours, I had thought of Stranger, I had imagined a wild and sinister figure coming to fight his last battle. One after another, his followers had disowned him, but nature was a jealous god. While they disowned him, they still feared him; and, if he came back, I had imagined a cowering movement among my neighbours, like that of a fascinated rabbit. I was far from sure that I should not myself cower and blench. God he might be, or devil: but he was not a man.

Until I heard his voice, I was convinced that we had seen the last of him. When I turned to find myself facing a man of my own age, dressed like other men of our world, I answered him in the language of our world, telling him the arrangements for the evening and asking him whither he had gone. In his turn, he enquired anxiously whether he had missed the ballet. I, to keep the ball rolling, informed him that I had nearly caused him to be locked out; and I made a tale of the Dennison vow and of the annual distribution of meat and ale. Then the carol ended; and I leaned forward to tell Mrs. Reid that Mr. Stranger was returned.

Disappointed?

I was certainly disappointed, but infinitely more relieved. I hardly know what panic I had expected, but none came. The most critical observer could only have said that we betrayed our nervousness by excessive cordiality. Mrs. Reid enquired anxiously whether he had taken cold. Adela, who was afraid to be left alone, asked if he had lost his way. Miss Arley, who had crossed herself earlier in the day when I came into the room, announced from the window that it was still

raining. Yes, a critical observer would have detected that we were nervous, but he would have been puzzled to say why we were nervous in the presence of a young-old, pleasant-looking man, with a shy, attractive smile and a pathetic limp when he walked.

Mrs. Shapland, who was confessedly unable to look upon him as a man, offered him her chair.

The carol-singers had apparently reached the end of their programme; and, when the lights were switched on, Mrs. Reid exclaimed that it was time for us to dress.

"There I have the advantage of you," said Stranger, with the careful glance of a dandy at his well-cut coat and rigidly creased trousers.

"What are you going to do with yourself?," I asked, as we reached the foot of the staircase.

"Talk to you, if I may," he answered.

In the light of what happened afterwards I am aware that I had no cause for alarm. His tone was innocent of menace; his manner diffident and rather helpless. At the time, however, I felt that he was inviting himself to settle his account with me. For some reason I was always being challenged to give my opinion of this or that. I had passed my word that we none of us wanted to be rid of him and I had then worked against him. I was always laying traps for him; and he always saw the trap in time to avoid it. I hesitated; and, though I was looking at my watch and could not see his face, I would have sworn that he laughed.

"That will be delightful," I said. "Shall I tell them to send you up a drink?"

"No, thanks. I am so unsophisticated that I only drink when I'm thirsty."

I led the way to my room and gave Stranger a chair. I had intended to let him open the conversation; but, as he sat without speaking for nearly five minutes, I suggested that he must be glad to see Punch Escott up and about again.

"He looks a very sick man," said Stranger.

"The life he leads hardly conduces to good health," I said.

"No. It's utterly unnatural. However, that's a dangerous subject to discuss with you."

"Dangerous? We seemed to see eye to eye when last we discussed the subject."

"Only on one point: that you can't live a civilized life in the wilderness or a natural life in a city. Some of these poor creatures have been trying. And you see the result! Is that a gong?"

"The bell-ringers, I expect."

I paused in my dressing and threw open the windows to admit the musical chime of the hand-bells from the courtyard below. The night was starless and silent. I could not see the ringers, but from the purity of their notes I knew them to be masters of their art.

"Exquisitel," Stranger cried, as the music changed from pæan to tolling and from tolling to alarm. "What a pity the professor's not here!"

"Why?"

The bells had broken into Saint Cuthbert's peal; and Stranger waited till it was ended.

"I suppose," he answered meditatively, "that the bell which now summons the faithful to prayer is the descendant of one that was beaten in company with tom-toms and gongs to keep evil spirits at a distance. Our professor could give us another of his charming pictures! Paganism

clinging to its bells; and Christianity admitting them reluctantly into the most catholic of all worships! '*Video meliora proboque*', said some Christian father; 'I should like to exclude these relics of barbarism from my ceremonies, but these children *will* have them. *Deteriora sequor*. I must compromise.' . . . To be frank with you, I have no patience with certain members of this party."

Though I knew well enough whom he had in mind, I asked him to name them.

"And tell me why you are impatient with them," I added.

Stranger withdrew from the window and smiled wistfully.

"A battle once fought should not have to be fought again," he enunciated. "And this one was fought nearly two thousand years ago. You were discussing it the night I arrived. The professor was telling you, before I came, that Christianity prevailed for the moment because paganism could never satisfy a mystic, restless craving for something higher. And I am the first to concede that Christianity offered a higher ideal than poor Pan could ever put before his people! Self-abnegation. To deny yourself. To love all men at least no less than you loved yourself. To create strength within you by pressing down every yearning. To forego the natural might of your body and make yourself equal with the weakest. Chastity, mercy, gentleness. Pan's rule had none of this. And, when the world swung slowly away from Pan, he made his submission to the pale Galilean. The battle, you would have said, was over."

"It has to be refought by every man in every generation. Christ pointed the way, but, if I understand him

aright, he required that each should use his own strength to walk it."

Stranger's face flushed darkly.

"And in every generation the world, your Christian world, has wavered as these poor creatures have been wavering under our eyes. Pan was not 'good enough' for them, says our professor; and they were not good enough for Christ. They wanted the halo without the martyrdom; they wanted the life of the beasts without having to bear the mark of the beast. They might have walked erect, like gods, but they could not; they might have crawled on their bellies, but they would not. They remained men, average men, worthy men, Christian men. . . . Why would they not do the one thing or the other?"

"They were too weak for the one," I answered.

"And too timorous for the other! Why were they afraid? The people in this house, I mean. I know the change that has taken place to-day; but, until last night, they were valiant in what they now call debauchery."

"They were afraid," was all I could say.

"Of what?"

Punch Escott, I felt, or little Jocelyn Arley could have answered the question in more compelling terms than I dared employ. I took refuge in a phrase which I had learned from the professor:

"They thought it was an answer to everything if they followed their natural impulses. Nature, they said, had nothing to do with morals, though mankind had been puzzling over morals ever since Cain slew Abel. They denied the existence of sin; they should have said that their own sense of sin was only in abeyance."

Stranger sat without speaking until the gong began to reverberate through the house.

"What roused it?" he demanded in high scorn.

"Are you coming down?," I asked.

"Won't you answer my question?"

"I can only make a guess. When the primitive church identified sin with nature, the god of nature was identified with the eternal tempter. To follow a natural impulse then was to hearken to the devil's whisper. Before you came, as you may or may not be aware, some of us declared ourselves Pan-worshippers. When these remembered the teaching of centuries, when they recollected that the Devil had been given Pan's very attributes of horns and tail and cloven hoof . . ."

Stranger ran his fingers through his hair.

"I see," he murmured abruptly.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A VOTE OF NO-CONFIDENCE

I

I WENT into Enid's room on my way down, leaving Stranger to precede us. My hands were trembling, as I straightened my tie, and I could pretend no longer, even to myself, that I had not challenged him to declare himself.

"If we're not very careful," Enid warned me, "there will be a panic. These people have lost their will-power. At present Mrs. Reid is bullying them; but, if *he* raised a finger, they'd follow him. Or stampede. They're as nearly mad as human beings well can be."

"With some reason," I answered.

Mentally, I gave myself another twelve hours. After that I should not be accountable for my actions.

Stranger had not appeared by the time we reached the hall; and we were still awaiting him, in a silent circle, at a quarter to nine. Then the footman who had been looking after him came in with a note for Mrs. Reid.

"*'Will you excuse me?'*" she read out. "*'All right, but rather tired'*. Oh, we'll begin at once, then. Come right in."

A sigh of relief went up as we hurried into the banquet-hall. By this time, I fancied Punch Escott's brain was clear, but the glances that he threw over his shoulder warned me to be ready for a second collapse more shattering than the first. His mind was haunted by the unseen presence above us: forgetful of his late escapades, he would have sat down next to Jocelyn if she had not shrunk from him and hidden herself behind the professor. Peter stood for a moment by Adela's side in an attitude of mute appeal; as she stared vacantly in front of her, waiting to be told what she must do next, he turned away and crossed the room. The rest of us, in greater or lesser degree, were dazed; and Mrs. Reid, ordering one man to remove Mr. Stranger's place and another to see what he would like for dinner, was the only one to make a show of composure.

"I suppose the Helmsleys are in Edinburgh by now. I was just mad when Nora told me they had to go," she announced in apparent forgetfulness of her own efforts to disperse the party. "First one, then another. I thought one time I should have to eat my Christmas dinner by myself. I don't know what the matter is with Mr. Stranger . . ."

"My conversation must be more exhausting than I knew," I suggested. "He was talking to me all the time I was dressing . . ."

"He was . . . in your room?," asked Jocelyn.

She could hardly have been more incredulous if I had told her that I habitually slept with vampires tethered to the posts of my bed.

"We were listening to the bell-ringers," I answered. "Trying to work out the connection between bell-ringing and religion. I don't know whether the professor has a theory . . .?"

Protesting that this was not his subject, the professor came to my help in making the conversation general; and by insisting on an opinion from everybody we avoided long silences and went some distance towards recreating the atmosphere of our first night in that room. Now, as then, the professor forgot to eat and lapsed into reverie, from which he emerged startingly with requests that his wife should supply him with forgotten names. Now, as then, Mrs. Reid whispered that the wine was to be left on the table to prevent interruption. Alas! now, as then, an unexpected outburst from Peter caused her to make me responsible for seeing that he had nothing more to drink. The principal difference I remember was that we sat without separating after the cigars and coffee had been brought in.

"If we could start again from that night . . .", Mrs. Reid whispered to me.

"We can go some way in that direction," I encouraged her. "Whoever, whatever that creature upstairs may be . . ."

"What do you believe yourself?," she interrupted.

"I don't know; but, whatever he is, we've beaten him. What's done can't be undone," I hastened to add as I caught sight of Adela's face, "but we can mitigate the consequences. If we pledge ourselves never to mention the events of this week . . ."

"I don't think any one will want to," Mrs. Reid answered with a shudder. "If we could forget it, like a bad dream . . ."

I was speaking with greater optimism than I felt. A wide part of Northumberland must be aware by now of Nora Helmsley's interrupted romance. I never knew how many had been invited to the ballet; but, as no one outside the house-party attended, I was forced to believe that the Helmsley episode was not the only one to cause comment on the disastrous night of the ball. Among the consequences that we could not mitigate was the downfall of Mrs. Irwin T. Reid from whatever niche she occupied in Northumbrian society. Nateby, I felt, would ere long be once again in the market, but Mrs. Reid could hunt her lions no less happily in the Bois de Boulogne or on the Pincian Hill. Very soon Miss Arley would be returning to her own country. I hoped to hear even sooner that Adela and Peter were grasping their second chance. What happened to Punch Escott did not greatly matter. Poor consolation it might be, but there was no other: in time these unhappy creatures might convince themselves that for two or three days they had been mad and therefore irresponsible; with luck and loyalty the consequences of their madness might be concealed.

"A bad dream . . .," Mrs. Reid repeated.

2

IN the course of the evening she collected our promises of secrecy; and, when I recall her solemnity in canvassing us, one after another, I do not know whether to be amused or embittered by the recollection that rumours were flying about London before the New Year and that towards the end of January Adela Glynde served her late hostess with a writ for slander. It may be that Mrs.

Reid felt she must unbosom herself, whatever the consequences to the other women, or die of a tumour on her conscience; it may be that her tongue had never been schooled and that she was now too old to teach it reticence. To be wise after the event, I suppose there were indications even thus early that, for all her talk of bad dreams, she meant to forget nothing. With every minute that Stranger remained hidden in his room, the earlier appearance of panic diminished. Adela might be silent, Jocelyn abstracted, but both seemed to feel that they had nothing worse to fear. Punch no longer looked with bloodshot eye over his left shoulder; and, when the servants had left the room, we began to talk—cautiously, at first—of him who by common consent had theretofore been left unnamed. Yes, I should have seen that Mrs. Reid was committing her bad dream to memory and reaching out with both hands to fill the blank spaces. Every conversational path that night led back to the Stranger; every mention of his name provoked a discussion that always followed the same course and ended in the same fatuity. Each of us contributed our same evidence and advanced our same theory. And Punch Escott, from whom we continued—with the same futile optimism—to expect enlightenment, met us each time with the same disappointment.

“I’ve told you all I know,” he kept repeating. “There was a party at my place; and I met him. I don’t know whether I invited him or whether he was brought. . . . I *couldn’t* have invited him,” he continued hazily, “because I’d never set eyes on him before. . . . And yet I felt I’d known him all my life. I’m sorry to be so confused, but I remember hardly anything. I came to at some point and found him sitting opposite me (If I’d

seen him before, I've forgotten it). I said: 'Have a drink, little stranger', or something. And after that I always called him Stranger. . . . I couldn't ask him his name in my own house! Especially when I didn't know if some feller had introduced us already. Or I might have invited him myself. There was something extraordinarily familiar about his face, but I couldn't place him. . . . When I saw he was lame, I thought he might be one of my old armoured-car pals, who'd been knocked out. I couldn't recall any one of the name of Stranger. But then, of course, it *wasn't* his name. And yet he always answered to it. I don't know . . ."

We never extracted much more than this; but once, travelling the familiar road so far, Punch went a few paces farther.

"I was in the deuce of a position," he grumbled. "I didn't know who the feller was or anything about him. He'd arrived at the same time as the others, but my servants couldn't remember if he'd come alone; and I couldn't let on to them that I didn't know whether I'd invited him or not. When the others left, he just stayed put. I told my butler to find out when he was going; but the idiot couldn't think of anything to say except 'Will you be going by the evening train, sir?' and Stranger told him 'No.' . . . I was due in London, but I couldn't *leave* him; and he seemed to have taken up his residence with me for life. I nearly wired to say I couldn't come here; and then I saw it might give me my chance. I told him I was going away for Christmas; and, when he didn't take the hint, I suggested he should come too. That didn't appeal to him a bit. He was much too comfortable where he was. And he'd be there still if I hadn't made up a story about shutting the

house and giving the servants a holiday. It wasn't easy to shift him even then. He kept saying he wasn't wanted and hadn't been invited. He tried to get out when we stopped to have the lodge-gates opened; and all the way up the drive he was protesting. Then all of a sudden he changed and said it would be all right. 'Of course it'll be all right,' I told him. 'I shouldn't have brought you here, old boy,' I said, 'if I couldn't guarantee you your welcome.' 'I wasn't sure,' says he. 'I *am* sure now.' And in we came. That's all I know. Who or what he is . . .” For a moment he lapsed into his former despair. “It's pretty clear he's not going to leave me. And I didn't *believe*. . . . I thought the parsons had invented it all. . . . Now that you've invited him in here, I don't see how *you're* going to get rid of him. There must be a way.” . . . He turned miserably to the professor. “Isn't there a way with . . . *these*?”

Before an answer could be given, I broke in with a question of my own.

“With these *what*?,” I asked.

Punch's mumbling and whispering had succeeded in upsetting our nerves; and I was careful to speak out. He shivered at my voice and looked round in an agony of fear.

“*Him*,” he muttered, with an unsteady eye turned to the door.

“And who or what is he?,” I persisted.

“I've told you I don't know,” he growled. “I thought it was an old wives' tale.”

“What d'you think now?”

Punch opened his lips to answer and then hurriedly lowered his eyes:

“I don't know.”

"Yes, you do. You think . . ."

A muffled scream ran round the room; and I found that I had brought back the condition of panic which I had laboured all the evening to remove.

"Not so loud," implored Jocelyn.

"If he's what you think he is," I answered brutally, "whispering won't help you. If he's what you all thought him yesterday, he can't hear me from the other end of the house. If he's what *I* think he is . . ."

And then I had to stop, for I did not know, I do not know now and I shall never know what I took the Stranger to be.

"If he's really at the other end of the house . . .," whimpered Jocelyn. "I shall never dare go to bed . . .,"

Punch and Adela shivered in sympathy; and I felt that, if a stampede was to be averted, I must shatter these fantastic images by confronting the company, as I had so often confronted myself in these last three days, with the material fact of Stranger, hesitant, disarming and benign, a man who scattered crumbs to birds and escaped in lonely walks from conversational fashions to which he was unaccustomed. This time I would throw myself on his mercy, telling him that Punch had drunk himself into a state of perilous delusion and that he alone could dissipate it by reminding him of their first meeting and of their joint adventures in the war and elsewhere.

"I'm going to see how he's getting on," I announced. "He's had no dinner." . . .

I heard a gasp that may have been due to horror or to admiration; but, in this mood and at this moment, I knew no reason why any one should be either alarmed or impressed. Stranger had never excited in me a

physical feeling either of fear or of repulsion, though I am not going to say he did not make me realize that I was dealing with something abnormal. At this moment I was far more afraid that half-a-dozen men and women, already unbalanced, would work on one another's fears till they combined to madden and perhaps destroy themselves. If need be, I would revive an earlier conversation and tell him, as one man to another, that his departure would remove a sense of constraint from certain people who were no doubt foolish to feel constrained in his presence. As one man to another . . . I should need moral courage, but I knew that I stood in less danger from him than from my present hysterical neighbours.

I crossed the hall and mounted the stairs. Stranger's door was locked; and I could see no light. Tapping gently, I invented a message from Mrs. Reid and enquired whether I could have anything sent up. I was thanked, with the engaging courtesy that I had learned to expect, and assured that nothing was wanted.

"If I change my mind," the voice added, "I'll come down and forage for myself."

Midnight was striking when I descended the stairs again; and I took it upon myself to suggest that we should all go to bed. I might have been more successful if I had not repeated the Stranger's assurance that, if he wanted anything, he would come down for it. What I took for a conventional phrase came to be interpreted as an atrocious threat. The ground which we had recovered at dinner was lost. Those who seemed formerly to think they had nothing worse to fear now behaved as though the greatest battle of all lay still before them.

"If he *wants* . . . , " Punch echoed with a quaver.
"If he *wants* . . . God help me, help me, help me !"

3

THERE was now no question of separating. With a white and streaming face, Punch banked up the fire while Jocelyn turned on every light. Before the servants went to bed, they were instructed to lay a table for supper; and I think I explained that we were going to play poker. The professor and his wife were by now of my opinion that we could not safely leave so much raw material of madness unguarded; and we arranged alternate watches. When I tried to go off duty, however, there were plaintive cries that we must all stay together.

I look back on that night as the longest and most dreadful that I have experienced. No one spoke. No one slept, no one read. At regular intervals some one would feed the fire; and I heard little sighs of relief as the leaping flames added to the already excessive brilliance of the room. From time to time one or another of us would steal to the table for a sandwich or a glass of wine. And every few minutes we stared wretchedly at our watches.

I do not know if that Christmas morning was unusually dark, but at half-past seven the sky was no lighter than at three. It was still dark when the servants began to move about their work, dark when one of the men broke in on our surprising party with a note for me. It was signed "*Stranger*", but to this day I cannot be sure whether an initial precedes the name.

"*You have been so kind and courteous to me,*" I read, "*that it seems a shame to trespass farther on your good-*

nature. Perhaps you will forgive my asking one more favour of you when I promise that it is the last. I want you to make my apologies to our hostess and to say good-bye for me to the others. You wonder, perhaps, that I do not write to her myself, but I feel that our conversation last night will enable you to supply her with a better explanation than I could myself furnish.

"By the time you receive this, I shall have left Nateby. Perhaps I was foolish to come, but I cannot be wrong in leaving when I realize that my presence embarrasses my hostess and my fellow-guests. You must blame Lord Escott a little for being so insistent. And you may blame me for being too acquiescent. Whether any of you feel that you should blame yourselves at all for anything you have done or said or thought I do not presume to say, though I cannot help thinking that it is not usually in the power of one man, who falls in with every proposal, says nothing to offend and even withdraws to meditate by himself for much of the day, to disgruntle a party so completely as you hint (not in words !) that I have done. Will no one share the responsibility with me? You are so unlikely to have had the experience that I must ask you to consider what your own attitude and conduct in a party of strangers would be if one section declared that you were the reincarnation of the nature-spirit, while another proclaimed that your hat concealed the horns, your boot the cloven hoof, of the traditional devil. When such beliefs are entertained, I do not know how to contend with them. Would you? I am sure, however, that, if you found such beliefs a cause of distress to your neighbours, you would remove yourself far enough to make these beliefs a matter of academic interest only.

"And so, when I have finished this letter, I shall pack my bag. And, when I have packed my bag, I shall rest my

ill-used foot for an hour or two. And, when I am rested, I shall honour the birth of Christ in the glorious chapel here before setting out on my travels. Lord Escott must excuse me if I do not return with him, but I am sure he will understand my reasons.

"I wish our discussion last night had not been interrupted. I fancy you share my love for theorizing; you probably feel, with me, that we have too few opportunities to test our theories. And here, so far as I have been able to piece together the events of the last four days, came the proof of a conviction which we hold in common: the world is too weak for Christianity. It is too timid, we must add, for paganism; and so mankind remains suspended in mid-air, higher than the beasts and lower than the angels, miserable in the void between animal satisfaction and celestial bliss. Before you and your friends made that strange choice between Christ and Pan, did any but you and the professor—confirmed and universal sceptics!—reflect that the one was no more a practicable guide than the other? You, indeed, voted against paganism on the ground that civilization was the less uncomfortable: a confusion of the issue, surely? Or perhaps a simplification, since you left God out of both scales. Is that, secretly, your solution of the riddle? The form of Christ and the spirit of Pan? It has a long history to recommend it: nearly two thousand years.

"Curiosity has almost prevailed over natural diffidence in one respect: I would give much to read the next chapter in the lives of those who abandoned one misunderstood allegiance for another that they comprehended no better. To see that, I nearly resolved to stay. What is to be the mental, the moral, the material position of those who followed freedom when they thought nature ordained it, but picked up their chains when they fancied it was a devil's mutter? Heaven

is closed against them ; and they have closed the earth against themselves for fear of a hell which they imagine to lie under the earth ! Make my compliments to the professor : he has established his ingenious hypothesis. The rule of Pan came to an end on the day when a fanatic preached that kindly, joyous, savage Pan was in truth the embodiment of original sin !

“ And now, if I am to attend this service, I must waste no time.”

When I came to the end of the letter I hurried to a window and looked to the east where the battlements and towers were beginning to shew brown against a smoke-blue sky. The chapel windows were illuminated ; and I heard the quick, regular clang of a cracked bell.

“ He has gone,” I said and went in search of the man who had brought me the letter.

“ Gone !,” rose in a chorus of mingled incredulity and relief behind me.

4

WHEN I returned, the professor was reading the letter aloud. I learned nothing more from the footman than that he had carried Mr. Stranger’s bag to the chapel. Eight o’clock was striking as I pondered my next step ; the service no doubt was beginning ; and, if I waited half an hour, I might win answers to a hundred questions.

“ Or to none !,” I cried. The Stranger’s letter, elusive and mocking as his speech, told me nothing. “ How he must have enjoyed writing it ! I shall never know more than I do now ! ”

In spite of that, I walked—shivering in my thin clothes—half-way to the chapel. A bag was indeed lying by

the door; and I heard the rapid mutter of the creed. Should I wait?

I could think of nothing to say; and I came back slowly to the hall. Though the air was exhausted and the heat insufferable, the smell was a familiar one: less than twenty-four hours ago Adela Glynde had condemned it as the "reek" of powder and tobacco. The baffling animal-scent had departed. I wondered if I had imagined it! Then I realized that, if I began to wonder about anything, I should lose my few remaining wits.

Throwing open a window, I looked down from the embrasure on the group that thronged about the professor. But for their dresses the scene might have been taken for a subject-picture: *The Order for Release*; or *The Reading of the Reprieve in the Condemned Cell*. When he had done, the professor put the letter back in its envelope and looked round for me. I wished, however, to study the scene a little longer undisturbed.

At first I heard only a confused mutter: "What does he mean?" "Anyway, he's gone." Then Mrs. Reid assumed command:

"It's a dream. And it's over."

"A dream . . .," two or three voices echoed.

I knew that for some the dream would be less terrible than the awakening. With intent, I think, to spare the others, Mrs. Shapland took my wife's arm and led the way upstairs. Like a bejewelled corpse, Mrs. Reid followed them. I saw Peter summoning resolution to speak and watched with beating pulses while he crossed the room and touched Adela's hand. For a moment she seemed unconscious of his presence. Then she sprang back and, with a hand over her eyes, fended off even the sight of him.

Jocelyn, by herself in the middle of the hall, stood with her lips parted, panting as though she had run uphill. I waited, expecting to hear her scream, but she controlled herself and sat down, looking with faint surprise at her own bare arms and low-cut dress. I heard her asking the professor whether it was possible to send a cable on Christmas Day; and I guessed that the next boat to New York would have by some means to find a berth at the last moment for Miss Jocelyn Arley. Of Adela, after her one movement, I could make nothing: she stood like a statue carved out of white marble, staring ahead of her with eyes that I am convinced saw nothing. The professor went up and spoke to her; but she seemed not to hear him. Peter was now standing by the supper-table, opening a bottle of brandy and rocking unsteadily with the effort. For a moment his face was half-turned to me; and the expression twisted my memory back to a misty evening on the Victoria Embankment and a young man, already tasting the bitterness of death, poised to fling himself into the turbid swirl below.

Had I known what to do, I was too tired to do it.

I left my embrasure and went to recover my letter from the professor.

"You didn't see him again?," he whispered.

"I saw his bag outside the chapel. If you want to catch him . . ."

I stopped as a musical chime of bells rang joyously through the open window. Punch Escott jumped to his feet, demanding why any one was ringing bells at such an hour.

"Christmas morning," I told him; and he sat down again.

I noticed that he was running a feverish finger down the pages of a squat, paper-covered volume. It was the current Army List; I did not need to ask whether he was seeking the name of Stranger.

5

"WELL?," said the professor.

"Well?," I returned.

"When he calls us 'confirmed and universal sceptics', he is attempting irony, I take it. We must be chary in future of saying we don't believe in things that haven't come our way before."

"I'm ready to believe in anything, but what *are* we to believe? There are at least three explanations of everything that has happened since we came here. I saw a bag outside the chapel; I think it probable that the Stranger held to his intention of attending service there before setting out on his travels. Now, the commonplace explanation is that he is a moderately devout churchman, more devout—anyway—than any of us here. A more fantastic explanation . . ."

"Yes?"

"Would be that Pan has left us to make submission once again to the pale Galilean."

"Which do you prefer?"

"There is no doubt which is the more picturesque."

The professor shook his head without answering. I heard a snap as Punch closed the *Army List*. At the slight sound Adela turned her basilisk stare on him; and Peter threw a fuddled glance over one shoulder.

"Their eyes!," I whispered involuntarily.

They were the eyes of those who had passed through Hell.

"You . . . have not exhausted the possible explanations, you know," murmured the professor.

And there the matter rests.

THE END

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